



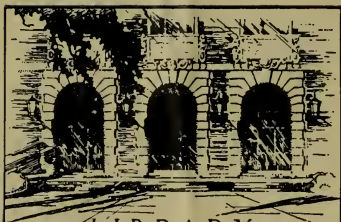
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INNOCENT:

A TALE OF MODERN LIFE.

BY MRS. OLIPHANT,

AUTHOR OF "THE CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,"
&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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INNOCENT:

A TALE OF MODERN LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

FLIGHT.

THE inhabitants of the villa were well used to the sudden sounds and sudden stillnesses which marked the changes of Amanda's moods, and on ordinary occasions no one thought of interfering or taking any notice. So long as aunt was there these were recognized as her share of the advantages of this life, and the rest of the household left her in undisturbed enjoyment of her privileges. But somehow on this evening other sentiments had been called into being. Aunt herself loved, in her way, the wilful creature whom she had nursed all her life, notwithstanding the ill recompense she received, and could not take advantage of the unusual holiday she was having. Instead of going to bed she hung

about the passages, sometimes listening at Amanda's door, more vigilant, more wakeful than ever. The maids who slept above were wakeful too. They were interested in the visitor, the curious pale girl who was one of Mr. Eastwood's great relations, "a real lady," and so much unlike the usual visitors to the house. Besides, though both the patient and her poor little unaccustomed attendant had slept, it was still comparatively early, about the hour of midnight. I do not know what there was peculiar in the stillness that crept through the house. Often enough before Amanda had fainted after one of her paroxysms of passion, and everything had gone on as usual, no one except her special nurse being much the wiser. But on this night a still horror seemed to creep through the place. The women up-stairs rose from their beds with a sensation of alarm, and poor aunty stood trembling at the door, not knowing whether to venture in, at the risk of disturbing the quiet, or stay outside at the risk perhaps of neglecting the patient. The moments are long in such an emergency. It seemed to her, I think wrongly, that this stillness had lasted full half an hour, when at last, emboldened by terror, and stimulated by the appearance on the stairs of the frightened housemaid in her nightgown, whisper-

ing, "Was anything the matter?" she opened softly the door of the room. All that aunty could see was Innocent, standing, gazing at the bed on which, to all appearance, the patient lay calm, with the softened reflection of the rose-coloured curtain over her. Innocent stood like a statue, white, immovable, gazing. Aunty stole in, frightened, with noiseless steps, afraid lest some creak of the floor should betray her presence. She laid her hand softly on Innocent's shoulder.

"Is she asleep?" she asked.

Innocent awoke as from a trance.

"What is it?" she said, shivering, and in low tones of terror. "Look, look! what does it mean——"

Next moment a great cry rang through the silent house—the windows were thrown open, the bells rung, the maids rushed in, half frantic with excitement; what was it? A dreadful interval followed while they crowded about the bed, and while aunty, moaning, weeping, calling upon Amanda, tried to raise the senseless figure, to bring back animation by all the means which she had so often used before. The wild yet subdued bustle of such a terrible domestic incident, the hurried sending for the doctor, the running hither and thither for remedies,

the strange dream-like horror of that one unresponsive, unmoving figure in the midst of all this tumult of anxious but bootless effort—how can I describe it? The cold night air poured into the room, ineffectually summoned to give breath to the lips that could draw breath no longer, and waved the lights about like things distracted, and chilled the living to the bone, as they ran to and fro, seeking this and that, making one vain effort after another. Innocent stood behind, leaning against the wall, like a marble image. She had been pushed aside by the anxious women. She stood with her eyes fixed on the bed, with a vague horror on her face. It was a dream to her, which had begun in her sleep; was she sleeping still? or was this a horrible reality? or what had she to do with it? she, a little while ago the chief actor, now the spectator, helpless, knowing nothing, yet with a chill of dread gnawing at her, like the fox in the fable, gnawing her heart. Innocent's head seemed to turn round and round, as the strange group which had swept in made all those wild circles round the bed, doing one strange thing after another, incoherent to her—moving and rustling, and talking low under the disturbed waving of the lights, and in the shadow of the curtains. When, after a long terrible interval, these figures dispersed,

and one alone remained, throwing itself upon the bed in wild weeping, the girl roused herself.

“What is it?” she asked, drawing a step nearer. “What is it?” It seemed to Innocent that something held her, that she could not look at the figure in the bed.

“Oh, my darling! my darling! I have nursed her from a baby—she never was but good to me. Oh, my child, my 'Manda! Will you never speak to me again! Oh, 'Manda, my darling! Oh, my lovely angel!” Thus poor aunty moaned and wept.

“What is it?” cried Innocent, with a voice which took authority from absolute despair.

“Oh, can't you see for yourself? It's you as has done it, driving that angel wild. She's dead! Oh, merciful heaven, she's dead——”

Then a sudden flood of light seemed to pour through Innocent's darkened mind. The horror which she had felt vaguely took shape and form. Heaven help the child! She had done it! She gave a low, wild cry, and looked round her with a despairing appeal to heaven and earth. Was there no one to protect her—no one to help her? One moment she paused, miserable, bewildered, then turned and fled out of the awful room, where so

much had befallen her. What could she do? where could she go? She fled as an animal flies to its cover—to its home, unreasoning, unthinking. Frederick would have represented that home to her in any other circumstances; but she had killed Frederick's wife. This horror seemed to take form, and pursue her. The maids were all gone: one to call the unhappy father, one to the husband, another to watch for the doctor; this last had left the door open, through which another blast of night air swept through the house. Down the narrow staircase poor Innocent fled noiseless, like a thief. Upon a table in the passage lay her hat as she had thrown it off when she came in that afternoon with Frederick, and the warm wrap in which Miss Vane had enveloped her when they started, so peacefully, so happily, for their drive. Was it only that morning? The High Lodge and its orderly life and its calm inhabitants seemed to Innocent like things she had known ages ago; older even than Pisa and Niccolo—almost beyond the range of memory. She stole out at the open door, drawing Miss Vane's great shawl round her, and for a moment feeling comforted in the chill of her misery by its warmth. For one second she stood on the step, with the moonlight on her face, wondering where she was to

go. The maid who was watching for the doctor saw her, and cried out with terror, thinking her a ghost. Then a sudden cloud came over the moon, and in that shelter, like a guilty thing, Innocent stole away. She did not know where to go. She wandered on through the dark and still village streets to the great minster with some vain childish imagination of taking refuge there. But here chance befriended the unhappy girl, or some kind angel guided her. The railway was close by, with some lights yet unextinguished. Vaguely feeling that by that was the only way home, she stole into the station, with some notion of hiding herself till she could get away. The express train to town, which stopped at Sterborne, though poor Innocent knew nothing of it, was late that night. It had just arrived when she got in. The little station was badly lighted, the officials sleepy and careless. By instinct Innocent crept into an empty carriage, not knowing even that it was going on, and in five minutes more was carried, unconscious, wrapt in a tragic stupor of woe and terror, away from the scene of this terrible crisis of her life.

Gradually, slowly, the sense of motion roused her, brought her to herself. In her hand, firmly clasped, was the little phial which had been so deadly. She

unclosed her fingers with an effort, and looked at it with miserable curiosity. *That* had done it—a thing so small that it was hidden altogether in her small and delicate hand. What had Innocent done? How could she have helped herself? What could she have done different? For the first time in all her life she turned her hot, confused eyes upon herself. She tried to go back over the events of the night;—not as in a mental survey with all their varieties of feeling disclosed, but like an external picture did they rise before her. First that moment when she (Innocent could think of her now by no name) was not angry or scolding, when Frederick sat and talked, and she herself stood and fanned *her*, the central figure to which henceforward all her terrified thoughts must cling. Then came the moonlight in the garden, the smell of the dewy earth, and her hand on Frederick's arm; then the reading, which seemed like some strange incantation, some spell of slumberous power; then the horrible sudden waking, the clutch of that hot hand, the incoherent half-conscious effort she made to do what was told her, the black drops of liquid falling, the interrupted counting which she seemed to try to take up again and complete—"ten, eleven, fifteen;" and then the terror of the renewed clutch and grasp, the sudden

stillness, the black drops standing out on the white coverlid, the great open eyes dilated, fixed upon her, holding her fast so that she could not stir. God help the child! She cried aloud, but the noise drowned her cry; she struggled under the intolerable sense of anguish, the burden of the pang which she could not get free from, could not shake off. So many pangs come in youth which are imaginary, which can be thrown off, as the first impression fades; but when for the first time there comes something which fixes like the vulture, which will not be got rid of!——Innocent writhed under it, holding up her feeble hands in an appeal beyond words — an appeal which was hopeless and which was vain.

It was still only the middle of the night when she arrived in London, and by some fortunate chance or other crept out again without being perceived. Poor child! far from her distraught soul was any intention of deceiving; she thought nothing at all about it, and in her innocence, without consciousness of harm, escaped all penalties and questioning. She did not know her way about London, but by mere chance took the right direction, and by dint of wandering on and on, came at last by a hundred detours, as morning began to break, into a region

with which she was familiar. The movement did her good. She felt her misery less when she was walking on and on through interminable streets, wrapping her shawl about her, feeling her limbs ready to sink under her, and her power of feeling dulled by fatigue. Probably this exercise saved her from going mad altogether. Life and more than life hung on the balance. She was not clever; she had no grasp of mind, no power of reason, nothing which could be called intellectual development at all, and yet the difference between sanity and insanity was as much to her as to others. She kept her reason through the subduing force of this exercise, the blessed movement and the weariness of body which counteracted the unaccustomed struggles of her mind.

It was gray dawn, that chill twilight of the morning which is so much colder and less genial than the twilight of night, when Innocent came at last in sight of her home. Her strength and courage were almost at an end, but her feeble heart leapt up within her at sight of the familiar place in which she knew shelter and comfort were to be found. She had never said anything which showed her appreciation of her aunt's tenderness, and had offered but little response to all the affection that had been

lavished on her ; but yet a slow-growing trust had arisen in her mind. She had no doubt how she was to be received ; she knew that kind arms would take her in, kind eyes pity her, kind voices sooth her trouble—and never in all her life had Innocent stood in such need of succour. The house was like some one asleep, with its eyes closed, so to speak, the shutters shut, the curtains drawn, and no one stirring. Innocent sat down upon the step to wait. She did not ring or knock for admittance. She sat down and leant upon the pillar of the porch with a patience which had some hope in it. She could wait now, for her difficulties were over, and her goal within reach. She had fallen half asleep when the housemaid undid the door, and with a scream perceived the unexpected watcher.

“Miss Innocent!” cried the woman, half in terror, half in disapproval ; for indeed Innocent’s odd ways were the wonder of the house, and the servants professed openly that they would not be surprised whatever she might choose to do. Innocent opened her eyes and roused herself with an effort.

“Yes, it is me,” she said softly. “I had to come home—by the night train.”

“Oh, how could any one let you wander about like this!” cried the maid: “and where is your luggage?”

Come to the kitchen, miss, there's no other fire lighted. You are as cold as ice, and all of a tremble. Come in, come in for goodness' sake, and I'll make you a cup of tea."

Innocent smiled her habitual smile of vague and dreamy sweetness in acknowledgment of this kindness—but she shook her head and went straight up-stairs to the door of Mrs. Eastwood's room. Her first arrival there came up before her as she paused at the door—her dissatisfaction, her indifference—oh, if she had stayed in the little room, within Nelly's, within the mother's, could this thing have happened to her, could any such harm have reached her? This question floated wistfully before her mind, increasing the strange confusion of feelings of which she was vaguely conscious; but she did not pause for more than an instant. Mrs. Eastwood was still asleep, or so at least Innocent thought; but the very aspect of the familiar room was consolatory. It seemed to protect her, to make her safe. She stole softly to the alcove where the gray morning light struggled in through the closed curtains. As Innocent approached, Mrs. Eastwood opened her eyes, with the instinctive promptitude of a mother, used to be appealed to at all times and seasons. She started at the sight of the strange

figure in hat and shawl, and sat up in her bed, with all her faculties suddenly collecting to her, to prepare her for the something she knew not what, which she instinctively felt to have befallen.

“Innocent! Good heavens, how have you come? What is the matter?” she cried. Innocent fell down on her knees by the bed; the fatigue, the cold, the personal suffering of which up to this moment she had been scarcely conscious, seemed suddenly to overflow, and become too much for her to bear. She clasped Mrs. Eastwood’s arm between her own, and looked up to her with a ghastly face, and piteous looks of appeal; her lips moved, but no words came. Now she had got to the end of her journey, the end of her troubles; but now all capacity seemed to fail her. She could not do more.

“My child—my poor child!” said Mrs. Eastwood. “Oh, Innocent, why did I let you go from me? Speak, dear, tell me what it is. Innocent, speak!”

“Do not be angry,” said poor Innocent, raising her piteous face, with a child’s utter abandonment and dependence upon the one standard of good and evil which alone it understands. And yet the face was more woeful, more distraught, than child’s face could be. Mrs. Eastwood, anxious, yet reassured,

concluded that the poor girl, weary and frightened of strangers, had run away from the High Lodge to come home, an offence which might well seem terrible to Innocent. What could it be else? She bent over her and kissed her, and tried to draw her into her arms.

“My poor child, how you are trembling! I am not angry, Innocent; why are you so frightened? sit down and rest, and let me get up, and then you can tell me. Come, dear, come; it cannot be anything so very bad,” said Mrs. Eastwood, with a smile, endeavouring to disengage her arm from Innocent’s hold.

But the girl’s fixed gaze and her desperate clasp did not relax. Her white face was set and rigid. “Do not be angry!” she said again, with a voice of woe strangely at variance with the simple entreaty; and while Mrs. Eastwood waited, expecting to hear some simple confession, such as that Innocent had been frightened by the strange faces, or weary of the monotonous life, and had run away—there suddenly fell upon her horrified ears words which stunned her, and seemed to make life itself stand still. They came slow, with little pauses between, accompanied by a piteous gaze which watched every movement of the listener’s face, and with a con-

vulsive pressure of the arm which Innocent held to her bosom.

"I have killed Frederick's wife," she said.

"What does she say? She must be mad!" cried Mrs. Eastwood. The housemaid had followed Innocent into the room with officious anxiety, carrying the cup of tea, which was a means of satisfying her curiosity as to this strange and sudden arrival. Just as these terrible words were said she appeared at the foot of the bed, holding her tray in her hand.

"No," said Innocent, seeing nothing but her aunt's face, "No I am not mad. It was last night. I came home somehow, I scarcely know how—It was last night."

"And, Innocent, Innocent—you——?"

"Oh, do not be angry!" cried Innocent, hiding her piteous face upon her aunt's breast. The woe, the horror, the distracting sense of sudden misery seemed to pass from the one to the other in that rapid moment. But the mother thus suddenly roused had to think of everything. "Put down the tray," she said, quickly, to the staring intruder at the foot of the bed, "call Alice to me, get Miss Innocent's room ready, and send some one for the doctor. She is ill—quick, go and call Alice, there

is not a moment to lose. Innocent," she whispered in her ear as the woman went away, "Innocent, for God's sake look at me! Do you know what you are saying? Innocent! Frederick's wife?"

Innocent raised herself up with a long-drawn sigh. Her face relaxed; she had put off her burden. "It was last night," she repeated, "we were alone; I did not want to go, but they made me. She was angry—very angry—and then—oh! She opened her eyes and looked at me, and was still—still—till they came I did not know what it was."

"And it was——? For God's sake, Innocent, try to understand what you are saying. Did she die—when you were with her? You are not dreaming? But, Innocent, *you* had nothing to do with it, my poor, poor child?"

Once more Innocent unfolded the fingers which she had clenched fast upon something. She held out a small phial, with some drops of dark liquid still in it. "It was this," she said, looking at it with a strange, vacant gaze.

And then a horrible conviction came to poor Mrs. Eastwood's mind. Out of the depths of her heart there came a low but terrible cry. Many things she had been called upon to bear in her cheerful life, as all stout hearts are—now was it to be swallowed up in tragic disgrace and horror at the end?

The cry brought Nelly, wondering and horror-stricken, from her innocent sleep, and old Alice, forecasting new trouble to the family, but nothing so horrible, nothing so miserable as this.

CHAPTER II.

A BEREAVED HUSBAND.

I WILL not attempt to describe the state of the house out of which Innocent had fled—the dismal excitement of all the attendants, the sudden turning of night into day, the whole household called up to help where no help was possible, and the miserable haste with which the two men, of whose lives Amanda was the centre and chief influence, came to the room in which she lay beyond their reach. Batty, roused from his sleep, stupid with the sudden summons and with the habitual brandy and water which had preceded it, stumbled into the room, distraught, but incapable of understanding what had befallen him; while Frederick, stunned by the sudden shock, came in from the room where he had been dozing over a novel, and pretending to write letters, scarcely more capable of realizing the event

which had taken place in his life than was his father-in-law. It was only when the doctor came that any one of the party actually believed in the death which had thus come like a thief in the night. After he had made his dismal examination, he told them that the sad event was what he had always expected and foretold. "I have warned you again and again, Mr. Batty," he said, "that in your daughter's state of health any sudden excitement might carry her off in a moment." There was nothing extraordinary in the circumstances, so far as he knew, or any one. The often-repeated passion had recurred once too often, and the long-foreseen end had come unawares, as everybody had known it would come. That was all. There was no reason for doubt or inquiry, much less suspicion. The glass which had fallen from the dead hand had been taken away, the black stain on the coverlid concealed by a shawl, which aunty in natural tidiness had thrown over it. Poor Batty, hoarsely sobbing, calling upon his child, was led back to his room, and with more brandy and water was made to go to bed, and soon slept heavily, forgetting for an hour or two what had befallen him. With Frederick the effect was different. He could not rest, nor seek to forget in sleep the sudden change which had come upon his life. He went out

into the garden, in the broad, unchanged moonlight, out of sight of all the dismal bustle, the arrangements of the death-chamber, the last cares which poor aunty, weeping, was giving to the dead. The dead! Was that his wife? Amanda! She whom he had wooed and worshipped; who had given him rapture, misery, disgust, all mingled together; who had been the one prize he had won in his life, and the one great blight which had fallen upon that life? Was it she who was now called by that dismal title? who lay there now, rigid and silent, taking no note of what was done about her, finding no fault? Frederick stood in the moonlight, and looked up at her window with a sense of unreality, impossibility, which could not be put into words; but a few hours before he had been there, with his little cousin, glad to escape from the surroundings he hated, from Batty's odious companionship, from Amanda's termagant fits. He had felt it a halcyon moment, a little gentle oasis which refreshed him in the midst of the desert which by his own folly his life had become. And now—good heavens, was it true? in a moment this desert was past, the consequences of his folly over, his life his own again to do something better with it. The world and the garden, and the broad lines of the moonlight, seemed to turn round

with him as he stood and gazed at the house and tried to understand what had come upon him.

It may be thought strange that this should have been the first sensation which roused him out of the dull and stupefying pain of the shock he had just received. Frederick was not a man of high mould to begin with, but he was proud and sensitive to all that went against his self-love, his sense of importance, his consciousness of personal and family superiority—and he had the tastes of an educated man, and clung to the graces and refinements of life, except at those moments which no one knew of, when he preferred pleasure, so-called, to everything, moments of indulgence which had nothing to do with his revealed and visible existence. He had been wounded in the very points at which he was most susceptible, by Amanda and her belongings. She herself had been an offence to him even in the first moments of his passion, and, as his passion waned and disappeared altogether, what had he not been compelled to bear? He had brought it upon himself, he was aware, and he had believed that he would have to bear it all his life, or most of his life. And now in a moment, he was free! But Frederick was not unnatural in exultation over his deliverance. The shock of seeing her lying dead upon that bed,

the strange, pitiful, remorseful sense which every nature not wholly deadened feels, at sight of that sudden blow which has spared him and struck another—that sudden deprivation of the “sweet light,” the air, the movement of existence which we still enjoy, but which the other has lost—affected him with that subduing solemnity of feeling which often does duty for grief. How could any imagination follow Amanda into the realms of spiritual existence? Her life had been all physical—of the flesh, not of the spirit; there had been nothing about her which could lead even her lover, in the days when he was her lover, to think of her otherwise than as a beautiful development of physical life, a creature all made of lovely flesh and blood, with fascinations which began and ended in satiny gloss and dazzling colour, in roundness and brightness, and softness and warmth. What could he think of her now? She had gone, and had left behind all the qualities by which he knew her. Her voice was silent, that one gift she possessed by which she could call forth any emotion that was not of the senses; with it she could rouse a man to fierce rage, to wild impatience, to hatred and murderous impulses; but that was silent, and her beauty was turned into marble, a solemn thing that chilled and froze the

beholder. What else was there of her that her husband could think of, could follow with his thoughts? Her soul—what was it? Frederick had never cared to know. He had never perceived its presence in any secret moment. But he was not impious, nor a speculatist of any kind; he indulged in no questions which the most orthodox theologian could have thought dangerous. He tried even to think piously of his Amanda as passed into another, he hoped a better, world; but he stood bewildered and saddened on that threshold, not knowing how to shape these thoughts, nor what to make of the possibility of spiritual non-bodily existence for her. He could not follow her in idea to any judgment, to any heaven. He stood dully sad before the dim portals within which she had passed, with a heavy aching in his heart, a blank and wondering sense of something broken off. He was not without feeling; he could not have gone to bed and slept stupefied as did the father, who had lost the only thing he loved. A natural awe, a natural pang, were in Frederick's mind; he felt the life run so warm in his own veins, and she was dead and ended. Poor Amanda! he was more sorry for her than he was for himself. The anguish of love is more selfish; it is its own personal loss, the misery of the void in which it has to live

alone, which wrings its heart. But Frederick, for once, felt little for himself. To himself the change was not heart-breaking; he was free from much that had threatened to make his life a failure; but for once his mind departed from selfish considerations. He was sorry for her. Poor Amanda! who had lost all she cared for, all she knew.

This is not a bitter kind of grief, but so far as it went it was a true feeling. He had more sympathy with his wife in that moment than he had had throughout all their life together. Poor Amanda! it might be that he had gained, but she had lost. I need not say what a different, far different, sentiment this was, from that which feels with an ineffable elevation of anguish that she, who is gone, has gained everything, and that it is the survivor whose loss is unspeakable, irremediable. Frederick's loss was not irremediable. But he was sorry, very sorry for *her*; the tears came into his eyes as he thought of the grave, and the silence, for Amanda. Poor Amanda! so fond of sound, and bustle, and motion; so confident in her own beauty; so bent upon gratification—all taken away from her at a stroke. He looked up at her window through his tears; the flickering lights had been put out, the

movement stilled; no more shadows flitted across the white blinds; the windows were open, the place was quiet, one small taper left burning—the room given over to the silence of death. And all this in a few hours! It was then the middle of the night, three or four o'clock; he had been wandering there a long time, full of many thoughts. When he saw that all was still, he went back softly to the house. He had nowhere to go to but the little parlour in which he had been writing, where he threw himself on the sofa to get a few hours' rest; and then it suddenly occurred to him to think of Innocent. Where was she? how had she disappeared out of that scene of consternation and distress? Frederick was cold and weary; he had wrapped a railway rug round him, and he could not now disturb himself and the house to inquire after his cousin. She must have gone to bed before it happened, he said to himself. He had not seen her, or heard her referred to, and doubtless it had been thought unnecessary to call her when the others were called. No doubt she was safe in bed, unconscious of all that had happened, and he would see her next morning. Thus Frederick assured himself ere he fell into a dreary comfortless doze on the sofa. Nothing could have happened to Innocent; she was safe and asleep, no

doubt, poor child, slumbering unconsciously through all these sorrows.

It was not till late next morning that he found out how it really was. Neither aunty nor any one else entertained the slightest suspicion that Innocent had anything to do with Mrs. Frederick's death. She had disappeared, and no one thought of her in the excitement of the moment. The very maid who had seen her leave the house had not identified the figure which had appeared and disappeared so suddenly in the moonlight. She thought first it was a ghost, and then that it was some one who had been passing and had been tempted to look in at the open door. In the spent excitement of the closed-up house next day—it was Sunday, most terrible of all days in the house of death—when the household, shut up, in the first darkness, had to realize the great change that had happened, and the two men, who had been arbitrarily drawn together by Amanda, were thrown upon each other for society in the darkened rooms, at the melancholy meals, with now no bond whatever between them—Frederick asked, with a kind of longing for his cousin. “Is Miss Vane still in her room? Is she ill?” he asked of the maid who attended at the luncheon which poor Batty swallowed by habit, moaning between every mouthful.

"Miss Vane, sir? oh, the young lady. She went away last night, when—when it happened," answered the maid.

"Went away last night? Where has she gone?" cried Frederick, in dismay.

"That none on us knows. She went straight away out of the house, sir, the next moment after—it happened," said the maid. "She was frightened, I suppose, poor young lady. She took the way to the minster, up the street. It was me that saw her. I didn't say nothing till this morning, for I thought it was a ghost."

"A ghost! My poor Innocent!" said Frederick. "Did she say nothing? Good heavens! where can the poor child have gone?"

He started up in real distress, and got his hat.

"Stay where you are," said Batty. "You are not going out of my house this day, and my girl lying dead. My girl!—my pretty 'Manda!—none of them were fit to tie her shoes. Oh Lord, oh Lord! to think an old hulk like me should last, and my girl be gone! You don't go a step out of my house, mind you, Eastwood—not a step—to show how little you cared for my girl, if I have to hold you with my hands."

"I have no desire to show anything but the

fullest respect for Amanda," said Frederick; "poor girl, she shall have no slight from me; but I must look after my little cousin. Miss Vane trusted her to me. My mother will be anxious——"

"D—— Miss Vane," said poor Batty, "d—— every one that comes in the way of what's owed to my poor girl, my pretty darling. Oh, my 'Manda, my 'Manda! How shall I live when she's gone? Look you here, Frederick Eastwood, I know most of your goings on. I know about that cousin. You shan't step out of here, not to go after another woman, and the breath scarce out of my poor girl."

"I must know where Innocent has gone," cried Frederick, chafing at this restriction, yet moved by so much natural emotion as to hesitate before wounding the feelings of Amanda's father. "I have little wish to go out, heaven knows; but the poor child——"

"I will find out about the child," said Batty; and Frederick did not escape till the night had come again, and he could steal out in the darkness to supplement the information which Batty's groom managed to collect. Innocent had been seen by various people in her flight. She had been watched to the shadow of the minster, and then to the railway, where nobody had seen her go into the train,

but which was certainly the last spot where she had been. Frederick was discomposed by this incident, more perhaps than became a man whose wife had died the day before. He could not leave the house in which Amanda lay dead to follow Innocent; but in his mind he thought a great deal more of her than of his wife on the second night of his bereavement. Where was she—poor, innocent, simple-hearted child? He sent a messenger to the High Lodge, hoping she might be there. He felt himself responsible for her to his mother, to Miss Vane, to all who knew him. As it was Sunday, however, he had no means—either by post or telegraph—to communicate with his mother. He had to wait till morning with burning impatience in his mind. Poor Innocent! how his heart warmed to the little harmless, tender thing, who had nestled to him like a child, who had always trusted him, clung to him, believed in him. Nothing had ever shaken her faith. Even his marriage, which had detached many of his friends from him, had not detached her. She had believed in him, whatever happened. I have said that Frederick had always been kind to Innocent. It had not indeed always been from the most elevated of motives; her supposed love for him had pleased his vanity, and he had indulged himself by

accepting her devotion without any thought of those consequences to her which his mother feared; he had, indeed, believed as firmly as his mother and her maids did, that Innocent was "in love" with him—and instead of honourably endeavouring to make an end of that supposititious and most foolish passion he had "encouraged" Innocent, and solaced himself by her childish love. But through all this vanity and self-complacency there had been a thread of natural affection, which was perhaps the very best thing in Frederick, during that feverish period of his life which had now suddenly come to an end. He had always been "fond of" his little cousin. Now this tender natural affection came uppermost in his mind. Real anxiety possessed him—painful questionings and suspicions. Where had she fled to in her terror? She was not like other people, understanding how to manage for herself, to tell her story, and make her own arrangements. And then there was the strange alarming fact that though she had been seen to enter the railway-station she had not gone away, so the officials swore, by any train, and yet had disappeared utterly, leaving no trace. It seemed natural enough to Frederick that she should have fled in terror at thus finding herself face to face with death. Neither aunty nor the maids had as yet sufficiently

shaped their recollections to give a very clear idea as to the moment at which poor Amanda died, and no one knew how deeply Innocent was involved in that terrible moment. But yet no one wondered that she had "run away," partly because the excitement of the great event itself still possessed the house, and partly because the girl's abstracted, visionary look impressed upon all vulgar spectators a belief that "she was not all there," as the maids said. She was supposed to be a little "weak" even at the High Lodge, where her piety had procured for her a kind of worship. That she should be driven wild by fright and should fly out of the house seemed no wonder to any one. Frederick lay awake all night thinking of her; he could not turn his thoughts to any other subject. How soon the mind gets accustomed to either gain or loss when it is final! Twenty-four hours before, his brain had been giddy with the awful thought that Amanda was dead, that the bonds of his life were broken, and that she who had been his closest companion, the woman he had loved and loathed, had suddenly and mysteriously departed from him, without notice or warning, into the unseen. The shock of this sudden interruption to his life had for the moment disturbed the balance of earth and heaven; in that terrible

region of mystery between the seen and the unseen, between life and death, he had stood tottering, wondering, bewildered—for a moment. Now, after twenty-four hours, Amanda's death was an old, well-known tale, a thing that had been for ages; it was herself who began to look like a shadow, a dream. Had she really been his wife, his fate, the centre of his life, colouring it wholly, and turning it to channels other than those of nature? Already this began to seem half incredible to Frederick—already he felt that his presence in Batty's house was unnatural; that he was a stranger altogether detached from it and its disagreeable associations, waiting only for a point of duty, free from it henceforward for ever. He was there "on business" only, as any other stranger might be. And his whole mind was now occupied by the newer, more hopeful mystery, the fate of his cousin. Poor little Innocent! how sweet she had always been to him, how soothing in her truth and faith. Perhaps in the halcyon time to come, free of all the bonds which his folly had woven round him, might he not reward Innocent for her love? If he could only be sure she was safe—if he but knew where she was!

Early on the Monday morning he rushed to the telegraph-office to communicate with his mother, and

ascertain if she had gone home. How he chafed at his bondage here, and that he could not go to satisfy himself, to secure the poor child's safety! No one, however, who saw Frederick with his melancholy aspect passing along the street had any suspicion that Amanda's memory was treated with less "respect" than that of the most exemplary of wives. The village was full of the sad story, and people looked at him curiously as he passed. Poor fellow, how he seemed to feel it! and no doubt she was very pretty, and men thought so much of beauty. Frederick's solemn aspect gained him the sympathy of all the villagers. They spoke more tenderly of Batty's daughter when they saw the bereaved husband. No doubt it had been a love match on his side at least, and whatever her faults might have been, it was dreadful to be taken so young and so sudden! Thus Sterborne murmured sympathetically as Frederick went to send off his telegram, with very little thought of his wife, and a burning impatience to escape from all her belongings, in his heart.

He went to the railway before he went back, to ask if any further information about Innocent had been obtained. The early train from town had just arrived, and to his astonishment he was met by his

mother, looking very pale, anxious, and almost frightened, if that could be. "Mother, this is kind," he cried, rushing up to her, touched for the moment by a sudden sense of the faithful affection that never failed him; and then he added hurriedly, "Innocent! is she with you? do you know where she is?"

"She is safe at home," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a heavy sigh.

"Thank God!" he cried; and it did not occur to him that his mother did not share his thankfulness, and that the cloud on her face was more heavy than any he had before seen there through all her troubles.

CHAPTER III.

MRS. EASTWOOD'S INVESTIGATION.

"I FEEL for you very deeply," said Mrs. Eastwood. "It is a terrible calamity. Your child, whom you hoped would close your eyes, whom you never thought to see taken before you——"

"She was the apple of my eye," said poor Batty, sobbing. Except when he stupefied himself with drink, or rushed into his business, and swore and raged at every one round him, which were the only ways he had of seeking a momentary forgetfulness—the man, coarse and sensual as he was, was tragic in his grief. "There was never one like her, at least to me. I do not say but she might have been faulty to others; but to her old father she was everything. I thank you from my heart for this respect. You mightn't be fond of my girl, while she lived. I ask no questions. It was because you didn't know her

—how could you?—like I knew her, that have nursed her, and have doted on her from a baby; but thank you all the same for the respect. It would have gone to her heart—my poor 'Manda! Oh, ma'am, the beauty that girl was! I never saw anything to come nigh to her. Her temper was quick, always hasty, ready with a word or a blow—but always the first to come round and forgive those that had crossed her. My life's over, my heart's broken. I don't care for nothing, horses nor houses, nor my garden, nor my bit of money—nothing, now she's gone."

"Indeed, I feel for you very deeply," said Mrs. Eastwood, "and at her age, so young, it is doubly hard—and so unexpected."

She recurred to this with a reiteration which was unlike her usual sympathetic understanding of others. There was an eager anxiety in her eyes when she suggested that Amanda's death was unlooked for. Frederick sat by with a countenance composed to the woe of the occasion, and strangely impressed by the profound feeling in his mother's face, watched her anxiously, but could not understand. What did she mean? Was she really so grieved for Amanda? Had the shock and pain of so sudden an ending really produced this profound

effect upon her? or was she so conscious of the advantage which Amanda's death would bring with it that natural compunction made her exaggerate her expressions of sympathy? Frederick could not tell, but he watched his mother, wondering. There were circles of weariness and care round her eyes, and signs of suppressed and painful anxiety, and an eager watchfulness, which was incomprehensible to him, were visible in her whole aspect. She even breathed quickly, as with a feverish excitement, all the more painful that it was suppressed.

"I thought you were aware, mother," he said, "that poor Amanda had been threatened for years with this which has happened now in so terrible a way. The doctors have always said——"

"The doctors, confound 'em!" cried Batty. "I beg your pardon, ma'am, but it's hard for a man to keep his patience. They're ready enough to talk, but what can they do, these fellows? Keep her quiet, they told me. My God! didn't I do everything a man could to keep her quiet, gave her all she wanted, never crossed her, let her have her way in everything! There is nothing I wouldn't have done for my girl. She'd have had gold to eat and drink if that would have done it. I'd have took her anywhere, got her anything. But no. Ask 'em,

and they tell you all that is unpleasant, but give you a way to mend it—no. They do it, I sometimes think, to make their own words come true. ‘She’ll go off one day, all in a moment,’ they said to me, years and years ago. Says I, ‘I’ll give you half I’ve got, all I’ve got, if you will make it so as this sha’n’t be.’ Trust them for that. They gave her physic and stuff, and shook their wise heads, and said she was to be kept quiet. What had keeping quiet to do with it? We’ve all quick tempers. I never could master mine myself, and how was she to be expected to master hers? From father to son and from mother to daughter, the Battys were always a word and a blow. I’d rather that a deal than your slow, quiet, sullen ones, that hides their feelings. No, you may say it was unexpected, for how was I to believe them? A bit of a flare-up never did me no harm. I never believed them. But now here’s their d——d artfulness—it’s come true.”

“And she knew it herself?” said Mrs. Eastwood, with searching, anxious gaze. “Oh, Mr. Batty, try and take a little comfort! It must have made her think more seriously than you supposed, if she knew it herself.”

Batty gave her a dull look of wonder from his tearful bloodshot eyes; and then he launched forth

again into panegyrics upon his lost child. "She was none of your quiet, sullen ones—still water as runs deep. She said what she thought, did my 'Manda. She might be too frank and too open to please them as hide their thoughts, but she always pleased her father. There's aunty, now, that was constantly with my girl, will tell you. 'Manda was always the one to make it up; whatever was done or said, she was the one to make it up. She spoke her mind free, but it was over directly. You should have seen her when she was a bit of a girl; she'd ride anything you put her upon—till the doctors said it was bad for her. When she was a baby I used to grumble and wish for a boy; but I'd never have been as proud of a boy as I was of my beauty, when I saw what she was coming to. From fifteen there never was a man as saw her that wasn't mad about her. Your son here, ma'am, Fred, as she always called him, poor girl, was the one that had the luck to please her; I don't know why, for many is the handsome fellow, titles and all that, I've had to send away. I've nothing to say against Fred, but she might have done a deal better. And now she's gone, where there's neither marrying nor giving in marriage. You are sorry for Fred, of course it's but natural; but it isn't half to Fred that it is to me.

Give us your hand, my boy ; I always look upon you as my son, for her sake—but it isn't half the blow to you as it is to me."

Frederick had started to his feet when he had heard himself first spoken of in this familiar fashion. The familiarity chafed him almost beyond endurance. He stood at the window, with his back towards his father-in-law, as Batty wept and maundered. Fiery rage was in Frederick's mind. What had this man, this fellow, to do with him ? a man with whom he had no relationship, no bond of connexion ? He took no notice of the outstretched hand. When would those slow hours pass, and the time be over during which decency compelled him to endure his odious presence ? What would he not give when it was all ended, when this horrible chapter in his life should be closed, and he himself restored to his natural sphere among his equals, restoring to his mother all the comforts which Amanda's existence had diminished, and taking once more his natural place. How he longed suddenly, all at once, for his old home ! He would never go back to the house which had been Amanda's ; he would sell everything, disperse everything that could remind him of this episode which, God be thanked, was over. Batty, though he stretched out his hand in maudlin

affectionateness, was satisfied that Frederick had not observed the gesture, and did not resent the absence of response. But Frederick had seen and loathed the offered touch. The days that must pass perforce before he could finally cut the last lingering ties which decency required him to respect seemed to him an age.

"I should like to see the—the—excellent person who attended upon poor Amanda," said Mrs. Eastwood, whose looks were still watchful and anxious, though a certain relief had stolen over her face. "Might I speak to her and thank her for her 'devotion—to my daughter-in-law?'" she added, almost rousing Frederick from his own preoccupied condition by the astounding interest and sympathy she showed. What could she mean by it? When Batty, pleased by the request, went himself to call aunty, Frederick turned to his mother with something of his old peremptory and authoritative ways.

"You did not always seem so fond of your daughter-in-law," he said.

"Oh, Frederick!" cried Mrs. Eastwood, with a depth of feeling which surprised him more and more. "I never wished her any harm. God forbid that I should have wished her any harm!"

“Has any one ever supposed you did?” he cried, with some impatience.

His mother put her handkerchief to her eyes. “God knows I am sorry—sorry to the bottom of my heart,” she said, “for her, and for the poor man who has lost his child. Whatever she was to us, she was his child to him. But, Frederick, I am not quite disinterested in my motives, God forgive me; it is for Innocent’s sake.”

“Are you out of your senses, mother? For Innocent’s sake?”

“Oh, hush, my dear! That I may ascertain the circumstances exactly, and how much is known. Oh, hush! Frederick, here they are. Don’t say a word more.”

He had to conceal his bewilderment, which was beyond describing, as aunty, in a black gown and with her handkerchief rolled up tight into a ball in her hand, came into the room. When he heard his mother speak to this woman in soft, caressing tones, and beg to hear an account of everything, every incident and detail—it seemed to Frederick that his understanding of the meaning of words must be deserting him. “Tell me everything; it is all of the deepest interest to me, and there is a mournful satisfaction in knowing the details,” said poor Mrs.

Eastwood, putting forth the conventional words with an uncomfortable sense of her son's criticism, and his doubt of her sincerity. But Batty had no doubt. He was flattered by Mrs. Eastwood's anxiety, by her desire to know all. "I ain't equal to it myself," he said, "but she will tell you," and withdrew to a corner, to listen and sob, and moan over his child's name. Mrs. Eastwood could not see his grief without becoming sympathetic. As for Frederick, he had heard the particulars often enough, and had no wish to hear them again. He was surprised and half offended by his mother's strange mission. For Innocent's sake! Were the women all mad together, one madder than the other? or what did she, what could she mean? He went out into the garden, his only refuge during these days when decorum forbade him to be seen; there he lighted a cigar, and with his hands in his pockets strolled about the paths. His mind turned to Innocent, and he thought to himself how pleasant it would have been to have had her there now, holding his arm with her delicate hand, hanging upon him, looking up in his face. He took almost a fit of longing for Innocent. But what folly about her could his mother have got into her head? what did she mean?

Mrs. Eastwood had a long interview with aunty. She heard everything about Amanda's illness; how aunty had thought badly of her from the first, seeing her strength give way; how her excitableness, poor dear, grew greater and greater, so that not a day passed without one or two outbreaks; how she took a fancy to "the young lady," saying she'd have her to sit with her, and not her ordinary nurse; how there had been a long silence when Innocent went to the room, while she was reading; how, after this, aunty had heard Amanda's voice in high excitement, talking loud and fast; how there had come a sudden stillness, a stillness so great that it waked poor aunty from her doze; how she had rushed to the rooms and found her patient in a faint, as she at first thought, with "the poor young lady" standing over her. "The poor child ran off from us in the midst of our bustle," said aunty, "and I don't wonder; she was frightened, and I hope no harm happened to her, poor thing. She was young to see death, and a nice young lady. I hope she came to no harm?"

"Oh no—except the shock to her nerves," said Mrs. Eastwood. She came straight home. It was the best thing she could do."

"The very best thing," assented aunt y. "An

if you'll believe me, ma'am, what with the bustle, and grieving so, and my mind being full of one thing, I never even thought of the poor young lady till to-day. I'm thankful to hear she's all safe, and not another house plunged into trouble like we are. I was saying an hour since, my heart was sore for her, poor young thing, her first being from home, as far as I understood, and to come into a house of such sore trouble, and to see death without notice or warning. It was hard upon such a child."

"Yes, it was very hard," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I left her ill in bed, her nerves shattered to pieces. And what a shock, what a night for you——"

"Oh, ma'am, you may say that," cried aunty, with tears. "I've nursed her from a baby, and nobody could care for her like me, except her poor father, as worshipped the ground she trod on. She's as beautiful as an angel," said the faithful woman; "never all her life, when she was at her best, did I see her like what she is now. Oh, ma'am, you've a feeling heart, besides being Mrs. Frederick's mother, and a relation like the rest of us. You'll come up-stairs, and look at her, poor dear."

And Mrs. Eastwood was taken up-stairs, and

what with infinite pity, what with unspeakable relief and ease of mind, cried so over Amanda's deathly beauty, that Batty and his humble sister-in-law were flattered and comforted beyond expression. She was a real lady, they both said—no pride like the other Eastwoods, or the rest of that sort, but with a feeling heart, and showing such respect as was Amanda's due. She made a conquest of both, and the household put itself at her feet when, with red eyes and a voice tremulous with emotion, she came down-stairs. She was just in time to receive Miss Vane, who, driving from the High Lodge in fulfilment of her promise to reclaim Innocent and pay a visit of ceremony to Mrs. Frederick, discovered to her consternation what had happened, and was anxiously questioning the servants about Innocent when Mrs. Eastwood came down-stairs.

"Went away in the middle of the night?" said Miss Vane. "Pardon me for speaking out. What a very strange thing to do!"

"She is a strange girl," said Mrs. Eastwood. "She was shocked and frightened beyond measure. The only thought in her mind was to get home."

"It was very odd all the same, very odd, in the middle of the night, and when she might have been

of use. I must write to my brother Reginald, and let him know she has left me. He will be surprised. I am glad she is safe in your hands," said Miss Vane, pointedly; "a girl that does such things is dangerous to have about one."

"Indeed, you mistake poor Innocent," said Mrs. Eastwood. "She is not like other girls——"

"Ah, that is evident," said Miss Vane. "I liked her too; there were many things in her that I liked; but a girl that acts so on impulse—I ought, however, to condole with you, Mrs. Eastwood. How very sad for—your son."

"It is a great shock," said Mrs. Eastwood. She was so much excited and agitated that on the smallest inducement she was ready to cry again.

Miss Vane regarded Frederick's mother with eyes of somewhat severe criticism. No doubt a certain decorum was necessary; but for the relations of a man who had made so unfortunate a marriage to pretend to grieve over the death of the objectionable wife seemed to her absolute duplicity. She eyed poor Mrs. Eastwood severely, making mental commentaries upon her red eyes, which were very little to her favour. "I had never the advantage of seeing Mrs. Frederick Eastwood," she said,

drily. "She was very handsome, I have always heard."

Then there was a pause; neither of the ladies knew what to say to each other. That she should be found here, doing as it were the honours of Batty's house, was not a position pleasant to Mrs. Eastwood, and she realized it for the first time now when her mind was relieved in respect to Innocent. But what could she say? She could not explain her horror of fear, her painful mission, to this representative of Innocent's family, who already looked suspicious and disapproving both at herself and at the strange conduct of the poor girl whom no one understood. When the pause had lasted so long that it was necessary to break it, she said hurriedly, "If poor Innocent had not been so much startled and shocked—so overcome, in short, by what happened before her eyes—I am sure she would have asked me to explain to you. But she is so young, and had never seen death before, and such a sensitive, imaginative——"

"Do you think she is imaginative? She looks it certainly—but I found her matter-of-fact," said Miss Vane, determined to give no countenance to these wild proceedings. Mrs. Eastwood was thus driven upon another tack.

"I am going back this afternoon," she said, "her story was so incoherent, poor child; and I feared for the effect the shock might have—upon my son."

"Is he imaginative too," asked Miss Vane.

"He is my boy," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a comforting flush of indignation and offence, "naturally my first thought was for him. I go back to my other poor child to-night."

"A most fatiguing journey for you, I am sure," said the visitor, and they took a stately leave of each other, with no very friendly feeling. Had the brother only been there instead of the sister! Mrs. Eastwood thought to herself. John Vane was the only person in the world to whom possibly she might have confided the terror she had gone through—who might have advised what was best to be done. Even to Frederick Mrs. Eastwood reflected she never could whisper the horrible delusion which had taken possession of Innocent's mind. For it could be nothing but delusion—yet how vivid, how powerful! Nelly knew of it, and Alice, who were safe as herself; and Mrs. Eastwood could not but recollect the other listener, whose commonplace imagination would never be satisfied by any certainty that the confession she had heard was the outburst of a mere delusion. The experience of life made her very

well aware that nothing is ever long concealed which has been put into words in the hearing of an uninterested bystander; and should any emergency arise, what should she—what could she do? There was no one whom she dared trust—not Frederick, not Ernest Molyneux. The secret must be locked in their own bosoms; nothing could be done but to keep it a secret. Even John Vane—but on the thought of him alone her anxious mind reposed with a certain consolation. Of all the world, he was the only one who might, perhaps, help them, should any terrible necessity for help ever come.

Miss Vane, on her part, went away shaking her head. “There is something in it all I don’t understand,” she said to the sister who awaited her in the pony carriage outside. “Innocent never concealed her dislike to Mrs. Frederick. Though she talked so little, she could talk on that subject.”

“Poor child, she was so simple and sincere, she said what she thought,” answered Sister Emily, whom Innocent’s church-going ways had deeply impressed.

“Oh, sincere! well, I suppose you may call that sincerity,” said Miss Vane; “but few people would like such sincerity in respect to themselves; and why with these feelings Innocent should have been

so shocked, I can't imagine. Depend upon it, there is something more in the whole business than meets the eye. I shall write to my brother all about it to-day."

CHAPTER IV.

AT HOME.

THAT was a day never to be forgotten at The Elms. Innocent had been partially soothed during the long Sunday by the constant presence of her aunt and Nelly, and the careful tendance of old Alice. They never left her all day long. She was brought back at her own piteous request from the room she had chosen for herself to the little room within Nelly's, which had been first prepared for her, and there lay all day long, holding the hand of one or the other in a state of prostration which it was painful to witness. So long as they were with her she was calm, but if left a moment alone, began to cry out about the eyes that were looking at her, the clutch on her arm. Sometimes she would doze and begin counting over and over again, counting "ten, eleven, fifteen," and would wake and start with looks of horror,

gazing wildly around her, not knowing where she was. Mrs. Eastwood's expedition to Sterborne had been decided upon by the mother and daughter as they sat together whispering over the fire, when Innocent at last fell asleep. Only one of the two could go, and Mrs. Eastwood decided at once that hers must be the mission. "We must know what is hanging over us—we must ascertain what we have to expect," she had said. Oh, in what labyrinths of woe and horror did their innocent simple life seem about to lose itself! For neither of them doubted Innocent's story. They felt that nothing which she had imagined could have produced such an effect upon her, and besides, what could have suggested such a strange idea? Her imagination was not impressionable. The only explanation was that it must be true. Mrs. Eastwood accordingly after her vigil set off in the early morning with a heart over-weighted with horrible anxiety, not knowing what might have happened before she returned, or what tumult she might meet when she got there. She was prepared to defend the unfortunate girl to the last gasp; but if this dreadful story were true, what could be done? To carry Innocent away at once out of the country, without an hour's delay, was a thought which had occurred both to Nelly and

herself, but this might make doubt into certainty, and precipitate the very danger they feared. Thus she went away, trembling with anxious fears, with traces in her face of the agitation she could not conceal; yet, at the same time, horribly on her guard, watching everybody and everything, to draw the secret if possible from others, and to conceal her own possession of it. The two whom she left behind to guard Innocent were almost more to be pitied than she was. They felt themselves the garrison of the room, to defend it against possible invasion. They locked the door of Nelly's chamber, through which any visitor must come, and then unlocked it again, fearing to awake suspicion. At every noise they started, and clung to each other, fearing nothing less than the horrible approach of justice to carry a prisoner away; and how many noises there were in the house that day! Carriages drove mysteriously to the door and drove away again, from the very moment about daybreak when Mrs. Eastwood left them, until the dreary afternoon which felt as if it would never be over. In that afternoon all the people left in London, everybody the Eastwoods knew, came to call, and had to be sent away with messages curiously worded to baffle suspicion, if any suspicion existed. The morning's post had

brought a short note from Frederick announcing his wife's death, and the telegram of inquiry about Innocent which he had sent off on Monday morning closely followed the letter ; therefore Nelly felt justified in drawing down all the blinds, and announcing that the death of her sister-in-law made it impossible for her to receive visitors. The maid who had heard Innocent's confession was the one who waited on them, who came with hard knocks at the door to tell of every new caller, and kept suspicious watch upon everything that passed. How frightened Nelly was of her ! How eager to conciliate and turn her thoughts into other channels ! But the woman was not to be moved into friendliness. She said nothing of her superior knowledge, but she betrayed a curiosity, and, at the same time, an amount of information which made the very blood run cold in Nelly's veins. She had not forgotten what she heard ; she did not set it down to delusion ; she believed what Innocent had said. To the vulgar intelligence it is always so comprehensible that evil should have been done. No questioning as to motive or likelihood takes place in that region ; that all men are most likely to go wrong is the one fundamental principle of their belief ; they make no distinction between the kinds of crime, that this is

more probable than the other. All they know is that guilt is always the most probable hypothesis, and that probably every accused person did what he was accused of, of worse, however unlikely the accusation might be.

And Innocent herself was restless and wretched; less stupefied, more living than on the previous day. She could not bear Nelly to leave her. She talked incessantly—she, whose habit it was never to talk at all, and her talk was all about the event which had made so tremendous an impression on her.

“Shall I always see her eyes?” she cried, holding Nelly fast. “She looked at me, and would not stop looking. Her eyes were terrible. She looked at me, yet she was dead. Oh, think! She was dead—and it was I who made her die——”

“Even if you did, oh, Innocent,” cried Nelly, worn out with excitement; “you did not mean it—it was an accident. She did it herself—it was an accident—it was not you.”

“But I wished her to die,” said Innocent, lifting her pale face with something of its old steadfastness of expression from the pillow. “I wished her to die.”

“But not like this—Innocent, you would not hurt any one, I know. I am sure you did not mean it.

Oh, you must know you could not have meant it!" cried Nelly, and wept, leaning her head upon the bed. How she felt her loneliness in that terrible emergency! Her mother had left her, and there was no one else to stand by her; to none in the world dared she tell this tale. Oh, if Ernest had but been as he once was, as she had thought him to be! if she but dared to send for him as a girl might send for her affianced husband, and relieve herself of the burden which was too heavy for her to carry alone! How blessed, how happy must the women be who could do this, who could trust entirely in the love and faith of the men whom they had pledged their own faith to! But on the contrary, even while she realized so fully the happiness, the comfort of such confidence, Nelly's prayer was that Ernest might be kept away from her—that he might not come to see her wretched suspense, or to spy into the terrible secret of the house. He did not love the house, though he had said he loved Nelly. The honour, the good name of the family, could never be trusted in his hands.

And so the lingering wretched day went on. I think Nelly was far more unhappy than Innocent was, though the girl's whole being was shaken, for Innocent had Nelly to transfer her trouble to; and

Nelly, poor Nelly, had no one. She had to bear up alone, and to bear up her cousin too; and with sickening fear she looked forward to the moment when her mother should return, and either relieve or intensify the strange suffering into which they had been suddenly plunged. It was about seven o'clock when Mrs. Eastwood came back, their usual dinner-hour—and Nelly had not ventured to neglect the dinner or to seem careless about it, lest the servants should suspect. Happily they were alone in the house, for Jenny had gone to his college, and Dick had accompanied the young freshman to Oxford to see him off, according to his own phraseology, on his University career. “Thank God the boys are away!” had been Mrs. Eastwood’s first exclamation; and Nelly had echoed it a hundred times during that terrible day. Thank God, they were out of the way altogether! Nelly ran down-stairs to meet her mother with an anxiety which was speechless and almost indescribable—feeling as if her own future, her own life, hung in the balance with Innocent’s. Mrs. Eastwood was giddy, and worn out with fatigue. She stumbled out of the cab into her daughter’s arms. There were lights in the little hall, and the housemaid stood about waiting to receive Mrs. Eastwood’s bag—the housemaid who had

received Innocent—the one person in the house who shared their knowledge. Mrs. Eastwood was very pale, but the aspect of her countenance had changed.

“Oh, Nelly, let us thank God!” she said.

“Then it was all fancy—all delusion—it is not true!”

Nelly sank down upon a chair, feeling her limbs unable to sustain her. She had kept up till then—though for her too (she felt) it would have been death as well as for Innocent. Now her head swam, her strength failed; she could scarcely see with her dim eyes her mother’s exhausted face.

“It is simple delusion,” said Mrs. Eastwood. “I cannot find even any foundation that she could have built such a fancy on—except that she was alone with—with poor Amanda, when the last paroxysm came on. Nelly, my darling, how pale you are! it has been too much for you——”

“You are pale too, mamma——”

“Yes, with fatigue—and relief—and thankfulness. Oh, Nelly, it seems wicked to be thankful when I think of that poor man who has lost his child.

“Mr. Batty?” said Nelly, with a perceptible failure of interest. The introduction of a stranger

into the conversation brought her back to ordinary life.

"My dear, she was his child," said her mother, with gentle reproach.

"But you have made quite sure, perfectly sure?"

"I have seen everybody. Her nurse, her doctor, her father, even the maids—there is nothing in it—nothing. It must have been fright, imagination, nothing more."

"Thank God!"

This conversation was quite spontaneous and natural; but it would not, I think, have taken place in the hall but for Jane's presence, whom it was necessary to convince as well as themselves. But for this the mother and daughter would have concealed both their anxiety and their consolatory news till they were alone. And Jane, can it be doubted, knew this, and felt in the superiority of her unconscious cynicism and disbelief in human nature that the whole scene was got up for her benefit, and was a piece of acting. "As if I was to be taken in so easy," she said to herself; "as if they could come over me like that!"

Innocent lay with her eyes fixed upon the door, longing and waiting for her kind nurses. It was old Alice who sat by her in the interval, holding her

head, smoothing the wild locks from her forehead. "My poor lamb!" said Alice. The old woman's heart was wrung with pity. I do not think she had ever believed Innocent's story fully. Neither did she believe fully the vindication which Mrs. Eastwood was bringing. She held the poor child's hand, and looked at her with soft pitying eyes. "My poor lamb!" To Alice, Innocent had always been a creature astray in the world; she did not wonder, like the rest, at this fatal complication in which her heedless feet had been caught. "I aye felt there was something coming," Alice had said, and her calm had been a support to them all in their excitement. Now she stood aside, and gave up her place to her mistress with far less anxiety than Nelly had shown; but kept behind, listening and watching the one person in the world whom all three could rely upon for life or death. Mrs. Eastwood, weeping and smiling together, came forward, and threw herself on her knees by Innocent's bed. She kissed her again and again with many sobs. "Put it all away out of your mind," she cried, "my poor darling, my dear child! Put it all out of your mind. You are as innocent as your name; you had nothing, nothing to do with it. Do you understand me, Innocent? You had nothing to do with it.

All you did was to be kind to her, good to her—not to bring her harm.”

“Then she is not dead?” asked Innocent, with a cry of joy.

“She is dead; but you are not to blame. Oh, Innocent, try to understand, try to believe me; you are not to blame. She died of a disease she has had all her life, not of anything that she took.”

“Ah! I gave it to her,” said Innocent, dropping back upon her pillows with sad conviction. “I was there, I know; you and the others could not see how it was. I gave it to her, and I know.”

“But, Innocent! listen to me. I have seen every one—the doctor, who must know best. And he told me exactly how it was, and what it was. He told me that he had looked for it for years—that he had always warned Mr. Batty how it must be. Innocent, you are not listening, you are paying no attention to what I say.”

“For I was there,” said Innocent. “Oh, do not be angry. I tried to count right; twice I threw it away because there was too much; the third time—oh, how can any one know but me? There was nobody else there—she in the bed, and I standing looking at her. And then all at once she was still—still like marble, and opened her eyes wide, and

looked at me. She knew I did it, and I know. Except us two, who can tell in all the world? Oh, if you would be kind and kill me too!"

"Innocent! Innocent! It is her reason that has gone," said Mrs. Eastwood, with tears. She stood before the unreasoning creature in all the impotence of fact against conviction. Nothing she could say or do would change the girl's certainty; and yet she knew that this to which everybody bore witness, and not poor Innocent's fatal fancy, must be the truth.

"Leave her to me, mem," said old Alice. "She'll be quiet now, and maybe sleep. She believes it; but the first effect is wearing off. Go and get your mamma some food and some wine, Miss Nelly, and make her lie down and rest. Leave this poor lamb to me, the first effect is wearing off."

"But, Alice, there is no truth in it, not a word of truth——"

"I wouldna take it in that way," said Alice; "there's aye some truth. Poor lamb, there has been something for her mind to fix upon. I'm no the one to say what it was—an evil thought, or maybe just a shaking of the hand, two or three drops too much, as she says, of the sleeping draught. But there's been something for her mind to fix on.

It's no for nothing that the creature is shaken and laid low like this."

"It is a delusion," said Mrs. Eastwood.

But old Alice shook her head.

Alice's suspicion was very hard upon the ladies in their first burst of relief. It disturbed their conviction, their certainty.

"What Alice says is mere nonsense," Mrs. Eastwood said, as she went down-stairs. "It is as clear as daylight that poor dear Innocent has been frightened out of her senses. There is nothing at all mysterious about the death. It is delusion, nothing more; you think so, Nelly, too?"

"Of course I think so, mamma," said Nelly, with fervour. "I was always certain it must turn out so." But nevertheless there was a piteous quaver in both their voices which had not been there when they went joyous and confident to Innocent's room to set her mind at rest with their good news.

After they had eaten, for the first time almost since Sunday morning—a hurried cup of tea having been their chief support and sustenance in the interval—they sat together for half an hour over the fire with a hidden sense of misery in their hearts, though Mrs. Eastwood's detailed narrative of all that had befallen her, and Nelly's many comments

and questions, the mutual support of two hearts which were as one, was not without its consolation. Before, however, this long and digressive talk was over Ernest Molyneux's well-known knock was heard at the door. He had a habit of coming in thus late after his evening engagements. Mrs. Eastwood started up suddenly.

"I am not equal to seeing any one to-night," she said. "You can tell Ernest I am tired; and Nelly—I don't bind you, dear, if it will be a comfort to you; but say no more than you can help——"

Thus the mother hurried away, leaving Nelly alone to meet her lover. After all the weariness and horrible suspense of the day, here was a reward for her—a moment of consolation, do you say, gentle reader? Molyneux came in from a dinner-party in evening dress, and with the air of society about him. He had looked in at his club, he had heard the news, he was full of the atmosphere of that conventional and limited sphere which is called the world; and he found Nelly in her morning gown, rising with a nervous shiver from the fire, her face pale, her eyes anxious, a creature trembling with the fulness of a life much different from that of clubs and dinner parties.

"Hallo, Nelly!" he said, looking at her with surprise and tacit disapproval. This sort of carelessness (he would have said) was inexcusable. It shocked his best feelings—a dowdy already before her marriage, idling over the fire in a morning dress—it might be a dressing gown next time, and in married life what would be expected from one who made such a beginning? All these commentaries were in the look he gave her, and the involuntary comparison he conveyed by a glance at himself in the mirror—himself all gorgeously arranged in purple and fine linen, and with a flower in his coat.

"I have not dressed, it is true," she said hurriedly. "Innocent is ill, and I have been with her all day. You have not heard of our——trouble. Mamma has been at Sterborne since early this morning——"

"At Sterborne! I thought Innocent was there; and yet you tell me you have been with her all day——"

"Ernest," said Nelly, breaking in suddenly, "Frederick's wife is dead——"

"Frederick's wife!"

"Yes, it happened late on Saturday. Innocent is somehow mixed up in it. I mean she was there

and saw it happen, and it has—almost—turned her brain.”

“She had not much to turn,” said Ernest carelessly. “But what does all this mean? Mrs. Frederick dead? You don’t mean to tell me, Nelly, that you were so much attached to her as to make a great trouble of that?”

“No, I suppose not,” said Nelly, looking at him wistfully, “but still, when any one dies—it is a—shock.”

She used her mother’s word unconsciously. Words for the moment had become to Nelly symbols, not for the expression, but for the concealment of her meaning; and oh! he surely might have read that there was more than her words said, in her eyes.

“Oh, a shock!” he said contemptuously. “Of course you would not have done anything to bring it about, but when Providence has been so kind as to deliver you from such an unpleasant connexion, you might be grateful at least. By Jove, what a lucky dog he is; he has had his swing, and as soon as the consequences threaten to be unbearable here comes in some cold or something and carries her off.”

“Do you call that lucky?” said Nelly, somewhat

woe-begone. "I suppose he loved her, or thought he did!"

"He has given up thinking anything of the sort for some time back, you may be sure," said Ernest. "Well, Nelly, I suppose the conventional correct sort of thing is right for women. Granted that you have had a—shock. But Mrs. Frederick's death cannot have made such a deep impression that you should look ready to cry at every word——"

"I suppose not," repeated Nelly, with a painful smile. She was indeed "ready to cry," but not for Mrs. Frederick's death—for many reasons that he could little divine.

"It is not cheerful for a man to come a long round out of his way to see you and find you like this," continued Molyneux. "I don't want to find fault, heaven knows; but when you are of so much importance to me, I ought to be of a little importance to you, don't you think, Nelly? A dowdy old gown, and your eyes red with gazing in the fire, or something else—and the lamp burning low, and a supper-tray or something on the table. Good heavens! what hugger-mugger ways you women fall into when you are left to yourselves! And what now, crying? Nelly, upon my word I don't think I deserve this——"

"I am in trouble, Ernest," said the poor girl, "and you are not. You can't enter into my feelings. I do not want to annoy you with things that you have nothing to do with, as you once upbraided me for doing. Next time perhaps I shall be in better spirits. It is very foolish certainly to cry."

Molyneux walked up and down the room in great impatience. He felt it was time to read a moral lesson to his future wife.

"I wish you would remember, dear," he said, "that neither your life nor mine is to be limited by the walls of this house. You ought to think of something else beyond what's going on here. And really I cannot see that the death of Frederick's wife is much of an occasion for tears——"

"But Innocent was mixed up with it," said Nelly timidly, with a feeling that he must know some time, that it would be better if he knew at once. "Innocent is—very ill—almost out of her mind——"

"Pshaw, Innocent!" he said; "if you open upon that chapter I shall go. I must warn you, Nelly, that I think you all make a great deal of unnecessary fuss over that girl."

This was the result of poor Nelly's faltering attempt to take her lover into her confidence. He

went away shortly after, chafing at the folly of women ; and she, poor girl, had a cry by herself in the dreary drawing-room before she went to share her mother's vigil up-stairs.

CHAPTER V.

INNOCENT'S CONFESSION.

AFTER this crisis there came a great lull. Innocent was ill. She lay for some weeks under the power of a mysterious disorder which was sometimes called low fever, and sometimes by other names. "She had no doubt received a shock," the doctor said, when informed by Mrs. Eastwood to that effect, and this was about all that any one could say. But she was young, and she got better by degrees. They were all very good to her. By the time she was able to come down-stairs Frederick had returned home. He had let his little house in Mayfair, prudently making the best of his domestic calamity, and had gone back to live with his mother after his wife's death with a gentle melancholy about him which most people, or at least most ladies, found impressive. He had been unfortunate, poor fellow ;

his marriage had been a terrible mistake, but yet it was very sad and shocking to lose a beautiful young wife so suddenly—and his conduct was most becoming, all that could be desired in the circumstances. Frederick had a luck for coming well out of a bad business. He had taken his own way, and derived from that all the enjoyment procurable, and then Providence had taken the trouble to step in and deliver him from his wife, who could not but have been a hindrance to him in life. Frederick himself accepted very piously this explanation of affairs. I don't know whether he went so far as to believe himself a favourite of heaven, but at heart he felt that he was lucky, very lucky; yet nevertheless he would talk about "my poor wife" now and then with touching pathos, and was very much sympathized with in some circles. On the whole, however, there can be no doubt that he was deeply thankful to find himself back again in *The Elms*, with his career still before him, and no harm done, or at least no harm to speak of. Sometimes, it is true, softening thoughts of tenderness towards the beautiful creature whom he had supposed himself to love would cross his mind. But Amanda's charm had lasted but a very short time, an incredibly short time, considering the insane force of the passion

which had swept him along to his marriage, and the momentary pangs of loss which, I suppose, being human, he must sometimes have felt, were as nothing in comparison with the sense of relief and deliverance which came over him when he recalled with an effort the strange feverish episode of life which he had gone through since he left the familiar family home to which he had now returned. Sometimes he wondered if it had been real, or if it was only some strange dream more vivid than usual, so entirely did every trace of that episode pass away, and the old existence come back.

But I think, on the whole, Frederick was a more agreeable inmate since he had gone through this experience. He was not fundamentally improved by his troubles, but he was more civil and tolerant to others. His wife had treated him and his feelings with no consideration at all, and he had not found that treatment agreeable. Thus experience made up for him the want of that moral imagination, if we may use the word, which enables some of us to put ourselves in the places of others, and consider their feelings by nature. Frederick was as far as ever from any disposition to sacrifice what he cared for to anybody's convenience—but in matters which he did not care for, he had, it must be allowed, gained

a certain power of toleration, and had learned to think that the others might have wishes, and to respect them. He was pleasanter to have in the house, even Nelly acknowledged. Things went more smoothly in the reunited household. Brownlow came back again well pleased, restoring to the house a certain amount of dignity which it had lost; and to all of them Amanda and her brief reign began to appear like a feverish dream.

When Innocent came down-stairs, an invalid, thin and pale, with eyes that seemed to have grown to double their size, and with all that touching weakness which appeals to every good feeling of humanity, Frederick was very good to her. There was nothing he would not do for her gratification. He would stay at home in the evening, and give up other engagements in order to read to her. He would draw her chair from one place to another, and watch over her comfort. Would she soon get quite well? Would she ever be the same creature as before—the passive, abstracted little soul, who lived in the midst of them without being of them? In many ways Innocent was changed. She no longer hung upon Frederick as she had once done. Her eyes did not go forth to meet him, her hand to grasp his. Indeed, at first she had been startled by his

presence, which was unexpected by her, and had shrunk from him—a fact which piqued him deeply, when at last he found it possible to believe that Innocent was less desirous than usual of his society. She had not the skill to conceal this strange and incomprehensible state of feeling, and when his mother had endeavoured to explain to him that he too was inextricably associated in Innocent's mind with the record of that night which had been the principal turning-point in her existence, Frederick did not like it. "Nonsense!" he had cried, with something of his old warmth; "what is it to her in comparison with what it must be to me? If I can bear it, surely she may be able to bear it. I did not think Innocent had been such a little fool."

"She has strange ideas," said Mrs. Eastwood, trembling as she spoke. "Sometimes I think her mind has been thrown a little off its balance. If she says anything strange to you about her own share in all that was done on that melancholy night, don't treat her with ridicule, Frederick. Sometimes I do not know what to make of her. Sometimes she is very strange."

"She always was," said Frederick, pulling his peaked beard with a certain complacency. He

thought he saw through it all. When he brought her from Italy she had been very young, and had not understood her own feelings; and then he married, and his position was changed. But now a further change had come. He was a widower; he was free to love and to marry over again. And Innocent, developed into self-consciousness, felt this; and felt that she herself, in her perilous position, had need of great additional prudence in her intercourse with him. Poor Innocent! This interpretation of her motives entirely removed any offence that Frederick might have felt. It gave him a delightful sense of his own powers and attractions, and inclined him doubly towards the little cousin who had so just an appreciation at once of himself and his circumstances. It opened his eyes to many things; among others, to her beauty, which had developed wonderfully. She was now not only very handsome, but handsome in a way which struck everybody. Hers were not the sweet and bright good looks of Nelly, but a quite distinct beauty of a high order—and Frederick began to admire Innocent more than she had ever admired him. He inquired into everything about her, and in the course of his inquiries learned all that happened with Sir Alexis, and was more amused and pre-

occupied by this piece of news than his mother could have supposed possible. He was amused, she supposed, for he laughed long and low, and could not be done with the subject. "So Longueville thought *he* could have her for the asking," Frederick said, with a laugh which was full of keen and covert excitement. "He was very nice about it," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I think he was really fond of her; and it would be a good thing for Innocent; a man who knows her so thoroughly, and would not expect too much. I don't think he has given up hope."

"Oh, he has not given up hope," said Frederick half fiercely, half laughing. He would not give any explanation of his amusement, but he returned to the subject again and again with a curious interest. And gradually he came to show a great deal of regard and attention to the invalid of the house, to all Innocent's desires and likings, as she came out of her fever. Sometimes she would look at him strangely, as if she had something to tell him, and then would sigh and shrink away, and avoid all conversation with him. Poor, dear little Innocent! she felt the difference. He was no longer a married man, he was free; she could not disclose her guileless love any longer with the sense of

security she had once had. Nothing could be more natural, nothing sweeter, more interesting to Frederick—and the whole secret of her conduct seemed to him to be in his hands.

Strangely different were poor Innocent's thoughts. The thing she wanted to do was to tell him of the one event she had never forgotten. "I killed your wife;" these were the words that were constantly on her lips, which in her forlorn honesty, poor child, she could not rest without saying. Though the sense of guilt had never left her, her mind had begun to accustom itself to the idea, horrible as it was. She began to feel herself in a measure the innocent victim of fate, guilty without intention. She had not meant it. Innocent's mind grew by degrees capable of taking in this thought, which was more complex than anything she had ever embraced with her intelligence before; she had not meant it—and yet she was guilty. She had reft another of sweet life, she had freed Frederick from his wife. She felt uneasy with him until she had told him, an impostor, approaching him under false pretences. Poor Innocent was in a sad strait between him and his mother. If she told Frederick the terrible secret, which stood like a ghost between them, Mrs. Eastwood would be angry

with her. This kept her back; and who could doubt that he too would be "angry" when he knew what she had done? The latter thought, however, was an inducement to make the disclosure; for Innocent, in her simplicity, could not bear the thought of keeping the secret, which might alienate her cousin from her, and yet accepting his kindness while she did not deserve it. Thus her secret had driven her out of the primitive region of sentiment in which her mind had hitherto dwelt, into that sphere of mental and moral complication in which most of us have our home. This it was that made her uneasy, embarrassed, almost unhappy, with Frederick. It may seem strange to the reader that any additional weight was necessary to disturb the calm of an unhappy girl who thought herself guilty of a murder. But Innocent was passive in feeling, and imagination scarcely existed in her; and besides I believe that though fictitious miseries are often very terrible, a fictitious guilt like this, though it may affect the mind as if it were real, can scarcely weigh upon the conscience like an actual crime. It is difficult to grope into such darkling corners of nature, or to discriminate between moral and intellectual impressions to a point so fine-drawn. I do not affirm this as a certainty, but I put it forth as

an opinion. Innocent believed that she had been guilty of a terrible crime, and yet she knew, poor child, that she was not guilty. Her mind was oppressed by it, her life clouded, all her peaceful passive existence revolutionized; but her conscience was not affected to a similar degree. Her consciousness had entered upon an entirely new chapter since this terrible event. Herself had become revealed to her by the light of it, and it was only by this light that she could realize her own individual and independent being; but she was not so unhappy as in the circumstances she ought to have been. She was unhappy with Frederick because he did not know, because he thought otherwise of her than as she deserved; but the general course of her life, though weighed down by this strange new consciousness, was not so unhappy as, according to all rules, it ought to have been.

There came a moment, however, when the crisis of this doubtful intercourse between Innocent and her cousin could not be put off further. Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly were dining out, and Frederick had benignly announced his intention of staying at home to take care of Innocent. This benevolent proposal did not quite meet with the gratitude it deserved. His mother immediately hesitated about her engage-

ment, wondered whether it was necessary that she should go, and betrayed a general uneasiness, in which Nelly shared. Innocent took little notice, but she did not look at him with soft grateful eyes, as she once would have done. He was piqued, and he was rendered obstinate by this mingled indifference and opposition, and, as her engagement was one which Mrs. Eastwood could not really give up, Frederick had his way. Innocent and Dick and he dined together, and when Dick went off to his studies, as was needful, the two between whom, as poor Innocent felt, that ghost stood, were left alone. It was winter by this time, and the drawing-room at The Elms was very warm and homelike when the ruddy curtains were drawn, the lamp lighted, and the room full of cheerful firelight. Frederick placed his little cousin in the easiest chair; he drew his own seat near her, and took the book he had been reading to her on the previous evening. It was a soft domestic scene, full of tender brotherly affection, kind and pious duty to that feeblest and gentlest of all the kindred, the youngest, the child of the house. Frederick felt a wave of warm and delightful feeling suffuse his heart. In some cases duty itself is the most pleasant of all pastimes, and this was one of those cases. How lovely that passive,

dreamy face was as Innocent sat and listened ! She was not at work, as so many women think it necessary to be. She was capable of doing absolutely nothing, sitting with her hands laid loosely across each other in her lap, listening—or dreaming—what did it matter ? The book that Frederick read was a story of gentle and unexciting interest, a soft and simple narrative, such as Innocent was capable of following. He felt that it was good of him merely to read such a book—a book not adapted to his manly intelligence, food for babes ; to have been seen with it in his hand was a kind of certificate of moral character. He, who had so many memories in his life which were far from being domestic or dutiful, felt in this tender moment such an accession of character as was enough to cover a great many peccadilloes. And Frederick loved character as much, or even more, though not with so warm a passion as he liked self-indulgence. How exquisite was the sensation when for once in a way duty and self-indulgence went hand in hand !

“ Do you like it, Innocent ? ” he inquired, after a time, pausing to look at her, and laying down his book.

“ Yes,” said Innocent softly ; but she did not look at him as she had been wont.

"You do not care very much for books, though. Do you remember, Innocent, in summer, the first summer you were here, when we used to walk about the garden together? You are changed since that time. You liked me better then than you do now."

"I, Frederick? You were the only one I knew," she said, with a startled look, moving uneasily in her chair.

"And you know the others now as well as me—my mother, and Nelly, and Jenny, and Dick, and we are all the same to you? Do you know, Innocent, I liked the old way best."

She made no answer; her hands twined and untwined themselves in her lap; her soft cheek coloured; it was still pale enough, heaven knows—but the faint tint that came upon it was a blush for her.

"I like the old way best," he continued, taking one of her hands into his. "Innocent, I have been very foolish, I have had a sad life of it for the last year. We must not say anything about the cause; but I have often been far from happy, and I never thought my little cousin would change to me. I could have understood any change in the world sooner than one in *you*."

"I have not changed, Frederick."

"Yes, dear, you have," he said. "Once you liked nothing better than to sit with me, to walk with me; now you are uneasy and anxious to get away. Your hand is trying to escape from my hand; why should it? Do you know, when you used to put it on my arm in the old days in the garden, the soft little touch was always a comfort to me? Don't you think I have more need of comfort now? but you take your hand away, Innocent."

"It is not for that—it is not for that!" she cried. "Oh, Frederick, I must tell you now. My aunt will be angry, and perhaps you will be angry, and never speak to me again; but I must tell you—now."

"What is it, dear?" he said, in his softest tones. "I shall not be angry—nothing can make me angry with you."

"Oh, Frederick, you don't know—you never could imagine what I have to tell you. Do not touch me. I am too bad—too terrible! I killed—your wife."

He looked at her with eyes of utter amazement, turning pale—not at this strange intimation, which seemed madness to him—but at the sharp recall to

his real position, and the different ideas involved in it. Then he smiled—a somewhat forced smile.

“My dear Innocent, this is the merest madness,” he said. “I partly understand what you mean. You think it was your innocent presence that drove poor Amanda into this last fit of passion. Put away the thought from your mind, my poor darling—any one else—any trifling accident would have done the same——”

Innocent kept her eyes fixed upon him, learning what he meant from his face rather than from his words—the words themselves were not adapted to penetrate into her mind. But from his face she knew that he was not angry, that he did not understand—that he was soothing her, persuading her that she was mistaken, as her aunt had done.

“It was not the passion—it was what I gave her from the bottle,” she said, her voice falling very low—“her medicine to make her sleep; she shook me—she snatched it from my hand; that killed her—and it was I who did it.—Now, now you understand!—and I know you will never speak to me again.”

“Good God!” he cried, and rose to his feet in sudden blind misery and bewilderment, driven wild

for the moment by a horrible doubt, which brought up before him in a second of time half-a-dozen scenes and suggestions. He had seen Amanda live through so many paroxysms of passion — why should she have died of that one? And Innocent had fled like a hunted creature from the house; why had she fled? These questions, that never occurred to him before, fell upon him now all at once. He seemed to see again the darkened house, the sudden excitement and horror falling into the ordinary stillness of night, the sudden change from ordinary events and the usual tenour of existence to death—confusion and trouble for the survivors; eternal silence for the one who had been the most exuberant, the most violent in her vitality. God in heaven! was the child mad and raving; or could this horrible confession be true?

Innocent sat very still in her chair, looking at him with fixed eyes. She had made her confession, and calm had returned to her. Her pale, slender hands lay loosely clasped in her lap, relieved against the black dress which she wore as mourning for Amanda. Her eyes were anxious, following his every look and gesture, but perfect calm had fallen upon her slight figure, her habitual attitude. Her secret was told, and all her embarrassment and

uneasiness gone. To look at her so, and to believe that she was an actor in any such tragedy was impossible. Frederick was overcome ; his eyes filled with tears. He was surprised by an overflow of feeling which he did not know how to restrain. He went to the back of her chair, and bent over her, putting down his hand upon hers.

"Innocent," he cried, "you are dreaming, you are raving ; it is impossible, anything is possible but this."

She lifted her face to him, searching into the expression of his with her anxious eyes. "Oh, do not be angry," she said, like a child that had done some petty wrong.

The incongruity of the appeal, the words so foolishly simple, the look so tragically anxious, had such an effect upon Frederick as nothing in his life had ever had before. Was the murder of which she accused herself no more to this child than the breaking of a piece of china, the neglect of some trifling duty? God help them all ! Wonder, horror, pity, love, all complicated with the mystery of a doubt which could not be shaken off, and a certainty which was above all doubt, distracted the very soul of the man, who could no more understand Innocent than she could understand him. He took her up-

lifted face in his hands, and kissed the forehead again and again. "Innocent, forget this madness," he said, "you make me wretched as well as yourself, for I love you—I love you better than anything in the world."

"Ah!" she cried, freeing herself and turning away; "but I cannot forget, I can never forget. For I did it; I did not mean it, but I did it. Do not be angry; but you must never say you love me again."

CHAPTER VI.

INTO FURTHER DEEPS.

WHEN Mrs. Eastwood came back she found that Innocent had gone to bed with a headache, and Frederick, with an agitated face, sat silent, brooding over the fire by himself. He had no book nor paper to occupy him, and his face was clouded, as it had been in the days of excitement before his marriage, or those of unhappiness which followed after. He said little while Nelly was in the room, but suggested crossly that she should go and look after Innocent. "If you will take the trouble," he said. His tone was full of irritation, as it had been in the old times, but seldom in the new. Mrs. Eastwood made Nelly a sign to obey. She saw at once what had happened. She went and stood by her son's side as Nelly went up-stairs.

"What does this mean, mother?" he said, turn-

ing moody eyes, which looked red and feverish, upon her. "What does it mean? Innocent has been raving about something I don't understand. Surely anything which concerns me so much might have been told me. For God's sake! what does it mean?"

"A delusion," said Mrs. Eastwood quietly, laying her hand upon his shoulder.

"A delusion! It is too serious, too terrible, to be a delusion. She must be mad. The shock must have turned her brain."

"It is mere delusion," said Mrs. Eastwood, with tears. "I went down to Sterborne, as you know, and inquired into everything. You remember that terrible morning, Frederick? You thought I went out of regard for your wife and her father. I went for Innocent's sake;—now I can tell you. I inquired into everything. It is a mere delusion; there is no foundation for it, nothing to rest upon. But I cannot chase it from the poor child's mind, and I knew she would tell you some day. I would not have had you know for much; but now that you do know, you must help me with Innocent. She must be convinced."

"Tell me the whole," said Frederick; and she sat down by him by the fireside, and told him every-

thing, omitting only by instinct to mention the presence of the housemaid when poor Innocent made her first confession. He drew from her by degrees every particular of the poor girl's arrival at home, her consistent story, from which she had never departed, and the little phial which had been clasped in her hand. This she showed him, taking it out of a desk in which she had locked it up. It had still a few drops of the opiate in it, and was labelled with the name of Mrs. Frederick Eastwood, and the date. The sight of this strange piece of evidence made Frederick shiver. It made him feel strangely for a moment as if Amanda still lived, and could still have such drugs administered to her. "It would be better to destroy this," he said, taking it out of his mother's hand. She took it back from him anxiously, and put it in the desk again.

"Why should we destroy it?" she said.

"It is the sort of evidence that would tell," he said, with once more a nervous shiver.

"Oh, Frederick!" cried his mother, "you don't mean to tell me that you think—it may be true?"

"I don't know what to think," he said gloomily. "Mother, I am very unhappy. I care more for Innocent than I ever thought I did. God help

us—it sounds very real. Why should she have taken such a thought into her simple mind?”

“God knows!” said his mother, and, moved in her turn, she began to cry, all her doubts and fears returning at the mere thought that some one else thought it possible, thought it true. They sat together over the dying fire, and talked it over in detail, entering into every particular, every recollection. They drew close together in mutual confidence; but they gave each other no comfort. Broken words that had seemed to have no connexion with anything actual came floating back to their memories. Frederick even remembered with the feeling as of an arrow which had suddenly struck and stung him, the words he himself had heard as he entered his wife’s room on that eventful night, “Can judges get people off?” and both of them were well aware how freely, how simply Innocent had announced her dislike to Frederick’s wife. I do not believe that Frederick had ever been so deeply affected in his life; but even at that moment there came into his mind a certain sombre consciousness of satisfied vanity which made things look still more black for Innocent. “Her known affection for me will supply the motive at once,” he said; his very vanity made him believe the whole

strange tale. His mother wavered between wondering doubts how, if it were quite untrue, such an idea could have come into Innocent's mind, taking possession of it so strongly—and a sense that it was impossible, that nothing so hideous and terrible could be. But Frederick, by mere stress of conviction that Innocent loved and had always loved him, found possibility, reality in the story at once. He did not even believe her own dreary assertion that she had not meant it. With the certainty of intuition he felt that being alone with her rival, some irresistible impulse which she perhaps scarcely understood had come over her, some impulse which being but momentary had faded, perhaps, from her recollection. He was very miserable. If ever self-complacency brought its own punishment this did. His unhappiness was intense in proportion to his conviction, which allowed of no doubt. "What shall we do with her?" he said.

"Oh, Frederick!" said Mrs. Eastwood, "you take everything for proved; and nothing is proved, not even the very first step. Neither you nor any one at Sterborne had the slightest suspicion. Nobody thought of Innocent as implicated. The death arose from natural causes, which had been foreseen, understood. The doctor himself——"

"Ah, the doctor," said Frederick, "perhaps I ought to see the doctor. But it might excite suspicion. The doctor was going away—he had got an appointment somewhere abroad."

"But I saw him," said Mrs. Eastwood, "he was most distinct in what he said to me—more medical than I could understand—but very clear. He said he had expected it for years, that Mr. Batty knew—that you even had been told——"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Frederick, "that was all very well. Her heart was affected; and very fortunate it is for us that such an idea existed. But, mother, Amanda, poor girl, has been in a much greater passion with me than she ever could have been with Innocent, and did not die. Why did she die just then, with no one else present, and with this business about the opiate? I wish you would throw that little bottle into the fire. It is the sort of thing which would affect a stupid juryman more than evidence."

"Oh, Frederick!" said Mrs. Eastwood, trembling and crying: "for God's sake don't talk as if it could ever come to that."

"Why shouldn't it come to that? If Batty once gets hold of the story, he will not let it rest, I promise you. He knows I hate him, and have

always done so, and he would believe it. Unfortunately, poor Amanda was aware of Innocent's feeling for me."

"Frederick," said Mrs. Eastwood; "Innocent, I am sure, had no feeling for you that an innocent girl might not have for her first friend, her protector, her relation——"

Mrs. Eastwood was not so sure of this as she professed to be, and the want of certainty showed itself in her voice. And Frederick was convinced to the contrary, and felt that he was right, whatever any one might say.

"You did not always think so, mother," he said. "I wish with all my heart it had not been so—but you must see that this feeling on Innocent's part changes at once the whole character of the story. It gives it a motive, it makes it possible. A girl would not do such a thing for nothing; but the moment you supply the motive——"

"Frederick, for heaven's sake! you speak not only as if she had done it, but as if she had meant to do it——"

"I speak as Batty would think, and as his lawyer would put it," said Frederick, with sombre certainty. "The best thing we could do, mother, would be to send her away. If she were taken to some out-of-

the-way place—in Italy, perhaps, as she knows Italy——”

“I cannot give up my poor child’s cause like this,” cried his mother. “Send her away as if she were guilty—banish her from her home——”

“It will be easier, you may take my word for it, to prevent an inquiry than to defend her if once accused,” said Frederick. “To have her accused would be ruin and misery to us all. I might be brought in. Don’t you see that mere acquittal would do little for us? The scandal is the terrible thing; and everybody would believe it, whether it was proved or not.”

Such was the consultation going on down-stairs while Innocent, strangely moved and agitated, lay in her little white bed looking at Nelly. The girl was not as she had been before; new thoughts were in her mind, new troubles in her heart. But she could not confide these to her cousin. She said simply, “I have told Frederick,” as Nelly kissed her, and asked after her headache. No such pretences as headaches were possible to her simple soul.

“You have told Frederick?—Oh, Innocent!—of this delusion, this fancy——”

“Of what happened,” said Innocent, “and he was very kind to me ; he was not angry. Nelly, tell me—will he always live here——”

“I suppose so,” said Nelly ; “but never mind Frederick, Innocent, you promised not to think of this—not to talk of it. It is a dream, a delusion. Mamma told you so. You promised to think of it no more——”

Innocent shook her head with a faint smile. “I cannot help it,” she said. “But you are sure Frederick will stay here always, Nelly?”

“Oh, what has Frederick to do with it?” said Nelly impatiently ; and she kissed her little cousin again and bade her go to sleep. When she had got to the door, however, her heart smote her that she had been unkind. She came back with tears in her eyes.

“What have you done, you poor child,” she said, “that you should be tormented like this? Oh, Innocent, say your prayers and ask God to put it away out of your mind.”

“I will try,” said Innocent.

Nelly went to her own room and wept—out of grief, out of pity, out of impatience and impotence. Everything was out of joint, and nothing poor Nelly could do would set it right. When her

mother came up some time after and told her the scope of her conversation with Frederick, and his suggestion to send Innocent away, Nelly blazed into generous momentary passion. "Give her up altogether!" she cried. "Send the poor child away whom God has trusted to us——"

"That is what I feel, dear," said Mrs. Eastwood; "but Frederick says——"

"Oh, I don't want to know what Frederick says! I am sick of Frederick—and all men," said poor Nelly. "Mamma, let us all go away somewhere and hide ourselves from this horrible world——"

"Nelly, Nelly," said her mother, with a smile, "which of us would tire soonest of that? You have other bonds which you forget in your haste—and I have the boys."

When Nelly was told of these other bonds she held her peace, with a flush upon her face. Yes, she had other bonds, and of all the four unhappy people who lay down under the kindly old roof of The Elms on that agitating night, she perhaps was the most unhappy. A heart running over with love, pity, generous impulses, but obstructed wherever her feet turned, unable to leaven her little world with her own generous thoughts, unable to convince it of what seemed so clear to her, bound down by

meannesses, by selfishness at which her soul revolted. The others were free more or less to follow their own instincts, but for her, she was in bonds, a spirit imprisoned, writhing under the cords that tried her, struggling with her fate.

“Oh, Nelly,” said Mrs. Eastwood, before she went to bed, “what can have become of John Vane? He is the one man in the world I could talk to about it all, and who could tell us what was best.”

Nelly made no reply. Her thoughts, too, had travelled perhaps the same way, but even while they did so it made her heart sore and bitter to think that it was John Vane, and not another, who was “the one man in the world” to help them in their terrible strait.

Innocent slept little that night. Something new was working in the girl’s mind. All the household almost without exception believed that she had been “in love” with Frederick from the time he brought her home; and Frederick himself believed it most completely of all, as has been shown. But Innocent herself had never thought of love, had known nothing of it, nor what it was. She had learned it for the first time that night. The discovery she made was not of anything in herself. She, in her

simplicity, in her preoccupation, was as quietly still and affectionate in her emotions as she had ever and always been. But Frederick's looks, his words, his touch, had startled her in her unbroken virginal calm. He had told her he loved her. Perhaps under other circumstances Innocent would have received this with childlike gratitude, and have said to herself simply that he was "kind"—how kind he was! But there was something in this interview which made so gentle an interpretation of the words impossible. Innocent felt without knowing that there was a difference, and the difference alarmed her, she could not tell why. It did not occur to her to think that the outburst was momentary, nor could she have believed that Frederick himself at that very moment was plotting her banishment. The impression made on her mind was not complex but single. He loved her not as the others loved, with a love which Innocent vaguely knew led to other ties and other consequences. This thought did not move her, as does the first suggestion of love which is destined to be happy; it filled her with fright and pain. She felt by instinct that between her and Frederick there was a gulf which could never be passed—a ghost, which kept them apart from each other; yet they were here, under the same roof,

compelled to meet daily—and he loved her! The more she thought of it the more alarmed and sick at heart Innocent grew. How could she avoid him, resist him, put away from her all the old habits which had grown into her life? She who had been used to put her hand in his, to take his arm, to talk to him more freely than to any one else—all this would be impossible if he loved her. She would shrink from the warmer, incomprehensible sentiment, but how could she shrink from Frederick? What would they all say? What would they think, if she, who had so clung to him, were to turn from him? she could not do it. With an imagination newly awakened which had sprung up suddenly in self-defence, she saw herself constrained to do as Frederick pleased: led with him where he chose to lead her, drawn into new circumstances which she did not understand, yet shrank from. To put these vague sentiments of fright, repulsion, and alarm into words is to do them wrong, and to give to them a distinctness which they did not possess, but words are the only medium I have for conveying to the reader any idea of the state of confusion, shame, pain, and terror which vaguely filled the mind of Innocent. This terror of Frederick's love was, perhaps, quite undue and unnecessary, since Frederick

had already realized the necessity for quenching anything like love for Innocent, and thought himself quite strong enough to do so. But perhaps it was some subtle consequence of the mistaken notion he had so long entertained of her love for him which produced this mistaken notion on her part of his love for her, and became the motive of the most decided act of her life. She did not sleep. The long, long winter night, which felt as if it would never end, spun out its lingering hours of darkness, while all these things passed darkly through her mind—but as she waked and dreamed there suddenly occurred to her a way of escape—a prospect of help. She had made a promise of which no one knew—a promise which had never before recurred to her mind from the moment she made it; this promise suddenly returned to her memory in her moment of deepest darkness. She had promised if she needed help, if she wanted change—a thing impossible at that moment, impossible a few hours ago, but now so real and so necessary—to seek it from one man; not the friend for whom Mrs. Eastwood sighed, whom Nelly bitterly and against her will involved in her thoughts; a saviour, whose name occurred to poor Innocent now as a sudden and only refuge in her trouble. When she thought of him,

and remembered her promise to him, Innocent fell asleep. She had some one in whose hands she could place her difficulty, and at once her own labouring mind, unused to any such burdens, was eased.

She said nothing to any one of her purpose. She felt instinctively that had she spoken of it, she would have been prevented from carrying out her intention. She did nothing, and said nothing, even to Alice, until next afternoon, when Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly went out on some necessary business. They thought it too cold for Innocent, and placed her in an easy chair by the fire, with the story-book which Frederick had been reading to her on the previous night. If anything had been wanting to confirm her resolution, this book would have done it. As soon as they were gone she went to her room and dressed herself carefully. She took care to make no appeal to Alice, who would have stopped her, she knew, and dressed herself without aid, taking out her best dress, the new mourning which became her pale and dreamy beauty. No one observed her as she went out, and very swift and straight, looking neither to the right hand nor the left, she pursued her way. She had gone with Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly more than once to the house where Sir Alexis Longueville had so often some-

thing to show his friends—now a new picture, now a rare flower, now some costly and elaborate piece of furniture. He was fond of everything that was rare and costly, and his bachelor house was one of the sights which connoisseurs delighted to be admitted to. It was not very far from The Elms, a detached house surrounded by a garden, which, in its way, was a sight too, notwithstanding the near neighbourhood of London smoke. Sir Alexis lived by himself in this dainty dwelling-place. It was like a child to him; he was constantly making alterations, projecting this and that, improving upon the unimprovable; and the house was a show-house. Nevertheless, when Innocent, young and alone, made her way to the door, and asked for Sir Alexis, the man who opened it to her was startled. Sir Alexis had not always been the irreproachable middle-aged gentleman he was now, and his old servant, as well as his old friends, recollected passages in his life which were not such as to make the visit of a young girl alone a natural occurrence. The servant stared at Innocent, and told her that his master was engaged, and made various excuses. But Innocent was imperious to all such hesitations. She would not tell what her business was, she would not be put off. “Tell him I want him,” she said

walking in, in her simplicity. Such a girl, absolutely preoccupied, unconscious of any evil, pursuing her object without *arrière pensée*, without fear or thought of harm, is, I believe, safe to go over the world without let or hindrance. She hesitated only when the man asked her her name. "Say it is Innocent," she answered at last, with a look of perfect gravity which checked the smile which began to form about his lips.

"A young lady?" said Sir Alexis, when the message was delivered to him. "Alone? it must be some mistake."

"No mistake, Sir Alexis," said the man, suffering the incipient grin to show itself, but with a cautious watchfulness lest it should be out of place. "When I asked if there was any name, she gave me a queer name. I don't know if she's all right *here*. She bid me to tell you, Sir Alexis, as how it was Innocent——"

"Innocent!" said Longueville, starting up. "You idiot, why did not you tell me? Where have you put her?" and with a haste and anxiety which put all thought of a grin out of his attendant's head, Sir Alexis rushed out, thrusting away the man, whose mind changed on the subject in the twinkling of an eye.

CHAPTER VII.

AN APPEAL.

“INNOCENT! you here, and alone—where are the others?” cried Sir Alexis, taking both her hands.

“I have come—because I promised,” said Innocent—“no one knows. You were to help me if I wanted help; I have come—for that. If I ever wanted to go away—to have some one to help me—that was what you said.—Surely you recollect?”

“Recollect!—yes, I recollect,” he said, in agitation and dismay, and led her to a seat. He looked at her with a wonder which words could not express, and with a troubled sense of his accountability for having made such a promise which had never occurred to him at the moment it was made. To have her here in his house, all alone, was an indecorum which struck the old man of the world as it never would have struck Innocent. “My dear

child, tell me what it is—I will walk home with you,” he said in his confusion, not knowing what other suggestion to make.

“But I do not want to go home,” said Innocent. “I came to you to help me. I have a great deal to tell you; but if they see me they will take me back, they will not understand. Oh, keep me here!—help me as you said——”

“Innocent! you bewilder me. What has happened—what can I do? But, whatever I can do, my dear child, it will be better for you to be at home.”

“I do not think so,” she said; “and I have been thinking a great deal—I have been very unhappy—there is a great deal, a very great deal to tell you. But for thinking of you, I do not know what I should have done. It was because you said so yourself that I have come——

“Yes, I did say so,” he murmured in his confusion. He was confused, but she was perfectly calm; her eyes met his with their childish look of appeal; no consciousness, no embarrassment, nothing in them that was not simple as her soul. The man’s heart was touched beyond expression. “Yes, my dear,” he said, “I did say so—and this house is yours, and everything in it. You shall

stay if you will—you shall do with it as you please. I am grieved—grieved to the heart that you should be unhappy. Have confidence in me—I will do everything for you that I could do for—my own child.”

“Thanks,” she said gently, “you were always kind;” and then seemed to fall into a half-reverie—a dreamy, self-absorbed pause. “I have so much to tell you,” she resumed, “I don’t know where to begin——”

“Tell me first why you have left home?” he asked.

A faint colour came upon her cheek—“That comes last of all,” she said, “and till you hear the first you will not understand. Frederick has come home. He lives with us again as he used to do; and last night—we talked—and he said he loved me. He must not love me, it is terrible so much as to think of it, after what has happened. And how could I live there and see him every day when that is what he is thinking? So I remembered you, and came to you to help me. Now, please, I want to go away—to stay there no longer—Take me, as you said you would—Take me away.”

“Innocent, do you understand what you are saying?” he asked, once more taking both her hands in his. Her words roused him out of all secondary

feelings. There was no passion left in his steady, middle-aged soul for any woman ; but this strange creature had charmed him by her strangeness, her rarity, the pathos of her beauty. She had refused him as few men are refused, and now had she come to offer herself to him ? Middle-aged as he was he could not refuse to be moved by a quickening thrill of excitement ; nothing could have made him an impassioned lover, but he was glad to have her, and his heart grew fond and tender as he held her hands. "Innocent !" he repeated, "do you mean this ? Think ! Do not encourage me and then disappoint me. There is but one way that I can take you anywhere. You must marry me first ; do you know ?"

She shrank a little instinctively, looking at him all the time with serious eyes, which shrank not, and then said slowly, "Yes—I know."

He was so startled by this assent, so taken by surprise, and, at the same time, so put upon his guard by all the decorums and punctilios of which she knew nothing, that he made no such response as a lover might have made. He uttered some broken exclamations in his bewilderment. The surprise was a joyful one ; but yet it was a surprise, and brought as much wonder with it as pleasure.

Then Sir Alexis remembered, suddenly, in the midst of his confusion, what was owing to the self-respect of a woman who had thus rashly risked herself and her womanly credit. He kissed the small, slender, girlish hands one after another with reverential fervour. "Thanks, a thousand times, for your generous confidence," he said. "I hope I am worthy of the trust. It is settled between us, then, of your free will, Innocent—of your free will? you will be my wife?"

"Yes," she said once more, grave as if she were uttering the sentence of her own fate. He bent over her, and kissed her forehead; then rising hastily rang the bell.

"Go to my sister," he said, giving his orders at the door of the room, orders which Innocent neither heard nor comprehended; "and ask her to come to me at once. She will do me a great service if she will be here in half an hour." Then he came back, and sat down by his future bride.

"Innocent, my darling, now that this is settled between us you can speak to me with confidence. What is it? Frederick would not, could not, have been rude to you? He is a gentleman at least. It is well for me, however, that this happened; but

tell me, dear, what it was?" he said, drawing her close to him. It seemed incredible to see her there in his house, bestowing herself upon him, she who only the other day had been so startled by his advances. He was flattered, touched, startled, full of wonder, not knowing what to do or to say.

"Yes," said Innocent, with a sigh. "But there is a great deal to say first. Perhaps when I have told you, you will cease to care, you will be angry, you will not want me. You say No; but you don't know what I have to say."

"Nothing you can say will affect me, my dear," he said, with almost fatherly fondness, and an incredulous, admiring smile.

"Ah, but you do not know!" cried Innocent; and then her voice fell into a low strain of narrative—gentle, yet penetrating and clear as a bell. "I was sent down to the High Lodge——"

"Has it something to do with that?" said the new bridegroom, gradually glowing into elevation of feeling more fitted to the occasion. "Then let us put off talking of it. You have been ill, my poor child. Your pretty cheek is pale. You are looking worn and thin. You shall go to Italy, to Pisa, Innocent——"

“Ah!” she said, with a deep sigh, long drawn out, and tremulous, “but first you must hear.”

“Not first, my darling—after, when we have spoken of things more important. We will go to Longueville first, and then to Italy. You shall take me to your old house, and we will find your old Niccolo——”

“Ah!” she said again, this time with a slight nervous shiver, “but you must hear—first you must hear. When I tell you, perhaps it will change everything. I was sent to the High Lodge; but it is not about that—Frederick saw me in the church, and took me to see his wife.”

“Is it about Frederick and his wife? I am tired of Frederick. You are trembling, Innocent. Leave this story for another time. It cannot make any difference to me.”

“To see his wife,” said Innocent, going on in a low, steady tone, as if, once started, she had no longer power to stop. “She was ill. She used to have fits of being angry. She would raise her voice and scold every one, it did not matter whom, even Frederick. He was very kind to me—he always was very kind.”

“Enough about Frederick,” said Sir Alexis, with some impatience. “Innocent, you cannot think that your cousin is particularly interesting to me.”

"Do not be angry," she said, with an appealing look. "He took me to his wife. I stayed with her a long time. She made me read. Sometimes she was angry, sometimes she was kind. I read and read; and then I fell asleep——"

"Selfish cur!" cried Sir Alexis, "to put the nursing of that terrible wife of his upon you."

"I woke up to hear her scolding. Oh, how red she was! how her eyes blazed! She shook me and called to me, and cried that she would strike me. I was not half awake; I was trembling——"

"Poor Innocent, you are trembling now. My darling, what does all this matter? Another time will do——"

"I had to drop the drops," said Innocent, sinking her voice lower, "I had never done it before. My hand shook, and she scolded, and I could not. At last—oh, do not be angry—she seized it out of my hand, and drank it. Listen! she drank it—and then she died. Do you know what that means? I killed Frederick's wife!"

"Good God! Innocent!"

"I was afraid—I was afraid!—I knew you would be angry," she cried.

Sir Alexis withdrew the arm he had put round her. He was speechless with wonder and horror.

“ Good God ! ” he repeated, when he had found his voice ; “ what did you do ? ”

“ What did I do ? ” she asked vaguely, looking at him with wonder and incomprehension.

“ Yes ; you alarmed the people, of course ? You told them what had happened ?—you had everything done that could be done ? How strange that I should have heard nothing of all this ! ” he said, rising to his feet.

Innocent’s heart sank within her. She looked up at him with anxious eyes, into which the tears were coming. No one had been angry before. They had all wept over her, comforted her. But now, at last, he was angry in whom she had placed her last hope. Sobs began to rise in her throat ; she deserved that he should be angry, she knew—yet she looked up at him with a pitiful appeal against his wrath. She was guilty of killing Frederick’s wife ; but of all this that came after—this, which she ought to have done, and did not—no one had ever told her. She made him no reply save by her look, by the big tears that rose into her eyes.

He had risen from her side rather in excitement and dismay than with any intention of deserting the poor child who had thus thrown herself upon him. When his eyes returned to her, and he met her

piteous look, his heart melted. He came back and sat down by her again. "Poor Innocent," he said, "poor little bewildered child! What did you do?"

"I came home," she said, shivering. "When they told me she was dead, I could not stay any longer. It was dark night—very late. I never was out so late before. I came home——"

"And you never told them? you did not say what you had done?"

"Do not be angry!" said poor Innocent, bursting into sobs that were piteous to hear.

He took her into his arms, and did what he could to comfort her. Poor child! poor man, who had bound himself unawares to her foolish fate! He never doubted her story for a moment, nor supposed that she had told him anything less or more than the simple facts; and while he soothed her, and tried to subdue her sobs, his mind set to work seriously, thinking how a way was to be made for her out of this coil which she had woven about her own feet. He was not less sorry for her than the others had been, but his mind was cooler and more ready to act in this emergency. To suppose that she had killed Frederick's wife, as she thought, was absolute folly, of course, he said to himself; but her flight, her silence as to what she had done, her

hurried return home, howsoever effected, would be terribly against her. He set his whole faculties to work to find a way out of it. "I am not angry," he said to her, "my poor child! how could I be angry? Innocent, Innocent, you must compose yourself. You must stop crying, and let me think what it is best to do."

Just then the door opened hastily, and Mrs. Barclay bustled in smiling and rustling, and gay, with her ample silken skirts and cheerful countenance.

"What is all this, Alexis?" she said; "what do you want me for in such a hurry? What do you mean by having young ladies here? Ah, Innocent, my sweet! I had it borne in upon me that it must be you."

Sir Alexis stumbled up to his feet, and Innocent checked her sobs as by magic, and turned wondering to the new comer. "My dear sister, you have judged rightly," he said. "Innocent has come to me about a difficulty she is in. I will go now to your aunt and see about it, my darling, and my sister will take care of you. Lucilla, this is Lady Longueville that is to be. You are the first to know it; you will take care of my poor little darling? She is ill and nervous! give her some wine, or tea, or something, and make her lie down and rest."

"That I will," said kind Mrs. Barclay, "I'll take care of her—the little puss! I knew this was coming. I said it all along from the very first day you saw her, Alexis; and I hope she'll be a sweet little wife to you, as good as she's pretty. I could not say more than that. My dear brother, how I wish you joy!"

And she kissed him heartily, and kissed Innocent, and laughed and cried in honest pleasure, the strangest contrast to the grave emotion, the piteous self-abandonment upon which she came like the very angel of commonplace life, good-humour and kindly feeling. She went with her brother to the door, shaking hands with him in her satisfaction. "Do you mean to say there has been some quarrel with the Eastwoods?" she said in an undertone.

"No quarrel, but something, I don't quite know what. Make her rest, Lucilla, and don't allow her to talk. Let me find her well when I return—for then we must decide what to do."

"Trust me, I'll take care of her," said the cheerful woman, and in another moment Innocent found herself all alone with this stranger, in a new world, deserted by everybody, everything strange around her, except the kind words which she was used to hear, though not from this voice. Her head swam,

and there was a ringing as of bells in her ears. But amid the desolation and pain she felt, there was also a sense of calm pervading her whole soul. This time she had put off the burden bodily, and some one else had taken it up. She had a trust in Sir Alexis, which was produced perhaps by the different way in which he had treated her confession. He had gone away to do something, to deliver her somehow. To bring back Amanda to life, perhaps, and make the dream come to an end; the dream of death or the dream of life, it did not seem to matter much to Innocent which was brought to an end. For what was she herself from her first chapter till now but a dream—a very dream?

Sir Alexis too felt very much like a man in a dream as he took his hat and buttoned his coat with habitual composure, though his whole being was shaken by the extraordinary position in which he found himself, and the extraordinary revelation just made to him. He walked along the suburban road towards The Elms with his mind full of strange and painful deliberations. His pretty Innocent, the rare and strange creature whom he had coveted as the very crown and flower of all his rarities and costly possessions, was it possible that the first sign of his acquisition of her was this plunge into terrible reali-

ties affecting life and death? He took a different view of the matter from that which had occurred to the Eastwoods. He never doubted that things were as she had said, and that Amanda's death had really been caused by the excessive opiate. Such things had happened ere now, a painful and haunting recollection, no doubt, to those unhappily involved in them, but not coming within any possible range of crime, or calling for the penalties of justice. To any creature in her senses the situation, though most painful, would have been simple enough. Had Innocent alarmed the house at once, had she called for instant help, and informed the attendants what had happened, she might indeed have regretted and grieved all her life, but she would have been delivered from all blame. But—God help the poor child!—she had done everything, on the contrary, to draw suspicion upon her, to give an air of real guilt to her wild proceedings. Sir Alexis could not even make out how it was that up to this time no notice had been taken of such an extraordinary incident. Had the family concluded to hush it up? had they managed to bribe or intimidate the doctor to hush all reports? That seemed almost incredible too. As he went quickly along, he planned out and resolved upon a totally different style of proceeding.

To have the matter investigated at once, and have Innocent's real share in it fully ascertained, seemed the only expedient possible. Without that what horrors might hang over her; what accusations ready to be brought up in after days if she made any enemies, or if he made any enemies, which was more likely! Thus he went on with a very anxious face to The Elms, where Innocent's absence had just been discovered with consternation. Nelly had been searching for her through the garden, and came in breathless through the conservatory as Sir Alexis entered by the drawing-room door.

"She is not in the garden," he heard Nelly say, in a tone of fright and anxiety. The ladies were both pale, and looked at each other with miserable embarrassment when he came in. Here was one of those domestic agonies which women have to suffer so often—a terrible emergency demanding all their thoughts, and an indifferent visitor suddenly thrust into it, to whom they must say nothing, betray nothing. Sir Alexis relieved them, however, at once of their pain.

"You are anxious about Innocent?" he said. "I have come at once to relieve you. She is with me—that is, with my sister—she is quite safe——"

"With you, Sir Alexis? Where did you find

her? She must have gone out—for a walk—” said Mrs. Eastwood, struggling to show neither her great surprise nor her still greater relief.

“We are old friends,” cried Sir Alexis, taking Mrs. Eastwood’s hand. “We have known a great deal about each other for years. Do not let it vex you that I know this. Innocent has told me everything; she has put herself in my hands.”

“Innocent—has put herself in your hands?—Are we dreaming, Nelly?” cried Mrs. Eastwood, struck by the apparent slight, the apparent abandonment, and looking at her visitor with mingled offence, mortification, and wonder. “Do you mean that she has gone to you—from us—— Sir Alexis, this cannot be the child’s doing. It is an unpardonable interference—an—intrusion——”

“Hear me first,” he said. “I am guiltless in the matter. It *is* the child’s own doing. Something frightened her—about Frederick—I cannot tell you what. I had told her that I was at her service if ever she wanted me. You know how one says such words.—She came to me this morning.—She has consented to be my wife——” he went on gravely, after a pause—“of her own will—and she has told me all her story.—Naturally, I have come to you at once——”

There was a pause—they looked at each other, each uncertain what was the next step to be taken—the next word to be said.

“She has—consented——” Mrs. Eastwood repeated in dismay. “Sir Alexis, I am her nearest relation, her only guardian ;—I cannot let you suffer for the sake of honour. When you spoke to her first there was no such cloud upon her, poor child. I cannot let you take our burden upon yourself.”

“I do not object to the burden,” he said gravely—“with her I accept it, such as it is. I do not ask for your sanction, because you gave it formally—you authorized my addresses to her. The question is now what can we best do to set this painful business at rest—to prove that it was mere accident—a chance that might happen to any one——”

“It is a delusion!” cried Mrs. Eastwood. “A mere delusion! there is nothing in it. Oh, Sir Alexis, believe me, though my children doubt. I hastened down to Sterborne as soon as Innocent came back; I got there on Monday morning—I saw all Mrs. Frederick’s family, every one concerned; the doctor assured me positively that she died of heart disease, as he had expected for years she would. Nobody had the slightest thought of Innocent as

any way involved. There is not a suspicion—not an idea—in any mind but her own.”

Sir Alexis had risen as she began this statement, and gradually went forward to her, holding out his hands. Mrs. Eastwood rose too, half sobbing, as she concluded, and gave him hers.

“Is this true?” he cried, with the water in his eyes—the unspeakable sense of relief proving to him, for the first time, what a horrible weight had been lying on his heart.

“Absolutely true!” she said, through her tears—feeling as she said it convinced by his faith, and by the intensity of her own words. What could be more sure? Every word she said to him was fact, as distinct and clear as it could be expressed—and yet—

Sir Alexis’ relief was so great that he rose into instant exhilaration and happiness. He dismissed the subject for the moment, and unfolded to Innocent’s guardian all he meant and wished to do. No end could be served, he said, by delay. He wished to marry her as soon as possible, to take her to Longueville, to Italy, to restore the freshness of her mind by new scenes. And the others, glad of the relief, entered into this lighter talk, and became almost merry over Innocent’s prospects. Yet Sir

Alexis left The Elms almost with as grave a countenance as he had entered it. When the conversation returned to the subject of poor Innocent's "delusion," the further information they gave him brought back painful uncertainty to his mind. Was it simple delusion after all—or was there something true at the bottom—something which might still produce grief and sorrow to her, unhappy, and to all concerned?

CHAPTER VIII.

FAMILY OPINIONS.

IT was thought best that Innocent should be brought back that evening to The Elms, where Mrs. Barclay accompanied her full of smiles and congratulations. "Since he could not have the one, my dear, he set his heart upon having the other," she said to Mrs. Eastwood; "otherwise I am sure he would never have married at all. He had made up his mind to have one of your girls. A good mother makes a good daughter; that has always been the doctrine in our family,—and oh, how glad I am that the old stock is not to be allowed to die out! It will be such a disappointment to the Huntly Longuevilles, they never could bear Alexis,—and I am sure if I once saw him with a nice wife and a young family, I would wish for nothing more in this world——"

"We must not go so fast," said Mrs. Eastwood.

"Oh, no, of course we must say nothing about that," said Mrs. Barclay, nodding and laughing in supreme satisfaction. She and her brother remained to dinner, and but for the moroseness of Frederick, who contemplated the whole matter with almost savage dissatisfaction, the evening would have been a more cheerful one than the Eastwood family had passed for some time. Frederick, however, was half frantic in his opposition when the party dispersed. He asked his mother how she could permit such a sacrifice,—how she could allow such a child to pledge herself to a man old enough to be her grandfather? "If you call that love for Innocent, I don't know what love means," he said.

"It is Innocent's own doing," said his mother in self-defence; "it is she alone who is responsible. I have had nothing to do with it,—for I feel as you do, Frederick,—to some extent."

"To some extent!—I don't know how you can limit the extent," he cried in fiery indignation,—
"and how about this,—what do you call it?—this fancy—this delusion——? She ought not to be allowed to go out of the family with such a notion in her mind."

"Frederick, I am afraid you will be annoyed,"

said poor Mrs. Eastwood, "I was very much distressed myself.—She—told him everything;—though, indeed, if they are to be married it was indispensable that he should know——"

Frederick almost foamed at the mouth with rage and vexation. He refused to believe that Innocent could have done anything of the kind of her own initiative,—he insisted that some one had suggested it, that she had been frightened,—that the idea had been put into her mind. After the improvement and amelioration of his manners, to which they had been gradually getting accustomed, he went to the very furthest bound of their endurance. He would be no party to the arrangement, he declared,—they might carry it out if they would, but without him. Frederick, indeed, was stung to the quick by what seemed to him the most manifold and most complicated invasion of his rights. Innocent had been his slave since ever he knew her, and she was to be taken from him,—and the secret of her delusion, or whatever it was, was exposed to a stranger. His wife's death, and Innocent's connexion with it, whatever that might be, all talked of, discussed, pulled to pieces by others! I think Frederick had some ground for general irritation, though he had no right to blame any one individually; he was very

sore and very angry at this revolution of affairs ; he had begun to think that Innocent was very pretty and sweet, and that he might reward her for her devotion to him, when lo ! there came, first this story about Amanda's death,—and then Innocent's sudden, unaccountable throwing of herself into Longueville's arms ! By degrees he became less sore, and began to think that he understood the latter incident, and Innocent, feeling what a great gulf lay between them now, now that he knew what had happened, had fled to Sir Alexis from her own despair and his. This made him less sore, but not less sorry. He had been conscious that he must think of her no more when he heard her revelation on the previous night,—but as soon as further thinking of her was useless, he felt that the revelation she had made was nothing,—that it was indeed mere delusion, as his mother said, and that Innocent, once removed out of his reach, became the thing he most longed for in the world. Altogether, that night brought him little comfort. He was impatient, unhappy, irritable, nay furious ; and, naturally, his fury fixed upon those who deserved it least,—upon his mother and sister, who were absolutely innocent, and upon Sir Alexis, who had been brought into the matter by appeal, without

any action of his. It was some days after this before he could even secure a chance of speaking to Innocent alone. They kept her from him watchfully, yet so naturally, that much as he chafed, he could say nothing,—and Longueville was there in the evenings, filling him with suppressed rage. At last fortune favoured him, and he found her for a few minutes alone.

“Innocent,” he said, “I fear you are going to take a very foolish step. Who has advised you to it? You ought not to marry Longueville,—a man whom you cannot care for,—a man so much older than yourself.”

Innocent shrank from him into the corner of the sofa where she was sitting. She made no answer,—but she shrank unquestionably, which made him more angry still.

“You are very foolish,—because you have been unhappy, you determine to be more unhappy, to leave no way of escape for yourself. If you marry that man you can have no sympathy with him. He is older than your father. Was there no one else in the world to help you, Innocent, that you should have referred to him?”

“Do not be angry,” sighed Innocent softly, turning upon him her anxious, deprecating eyes.

"No one else offered to help me. He is very kind——"

"Oh, kind!" cried Frederick, "is any one unkind? When you say such a thing you accuse us all. Surely I could have helped you better than Longueville——"

"Not you, Frederick," said the girl. She did not withdraw her eyes from him, but a faint flush came upon her face.

"Why not I? You are thinking of this business about—my wife. That was no reason why you should turn from me. Innocent, be wise in time, and give this man up."

He did not remember that she too had suggested to him to give up his marriage, with more simplicity, but not less unreasonableness. She shook her head half-sadly, half-smiling. She had no wish to marry Sir Alexis. The thought, indeed, filled her with vague alarm when it occurred to her. But he had taken her burden on his shoulders,—he had promised to set it right. And Innocent, not asking any questions, had been able to believe him. Such help no one else in the world had offered her. It seemed the only thing she understood or cared for in her life.

Thus the time stole away,—the interval between

this rapid settlement of affairs and the marriage-day, which was so strangely unlike other marriage-days. Innocent had her *trousseau* prepared like other brides, and The Elms was full of the excitement of the preparations. I am not even sure, notwithstanding all the circumstances involved which tempered the pleasure, that Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly did not derive a certain enjoyment from choosing her dresses, and buying her "things," and deciding how this and that was to be made. She was passive herself, and took little interest in what was going on,—but she was a very patient lay figure in their hands, suffering draperies of all sorts to be tried upon her, without active rebellion. The other ladies had the satisfaction of artists in dressing Innocent. She had never been "dressed" before,—and to get her up as Lady Longueville ought to be got up, was a delightful exercise of skill and ingenuity. Men, no doubt, have other solacements of a like character,—but one requires to be a woman to understand the genuine, simple, and natural pleasure which Nelly Eastwood, though her heart was sore, and her mind full of a thousand anxieties, got out of her cousin's *trousseau*. To try how one thing after another would look upon Innocent, to see which shade, which fashion would

become her best,—to fit her out in short for her new position, according to their own ideal of what that position was, amused the mother and daughter as few other things could have done, and distracted them from their own cares. If you despise Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly for this, my dear reader, I do not agree with you. The marriage itself was one in which they had no responsibility. They had not been consulted in it,—it was Innocent's own doing,—and considering all the circumstances, and the peculiarity of Innocent's character, it was, to Mrs. Eastwood at least, as she said, “a matter of great thankfulness,” that Innocent had selected for herself so efficient a protector, so kind a guardian as Sir Alexis. “He will give her everything that this world can give,” Mrs. Eastwood said, addressing an indignation meeting of her own two younger boys which had been hastily convened on the occasion. “He is very fond of her, and will consider her happiness in everything. He is an old friend of the family, and it need not trouble us to know that he is acquainted with all our circumstances.” This last remark was intended for Frederick, who stood sullenly at the window, turning his back upon the others, with his figure relieved against the light.

“Our circumstances?” said Jenny. “Is there

anything in our circumstances that may not be known to all the world?"

"That is all very well, mother," cried Dick, who was less observant, "but I don't know how you can make up your mind to give Innocent to an old fogie like Longueville. He looks a hundred and fifty. He has old ways of thinking, old habits; in short, he is an old fogie, neither more nor less,—and she is eighteen. It is the sort of thing one reads of in novels. Such things don't happen in real life——"

"My dear boy——" began Mrs. Eastwood.

"At least they oughtn't to," said Dick, "and as for its being Innocent's own choice, what does she know about it? She has been talked over. She has been seduced by all that trash of dresses and finery——"

Dick had spent half the precious morning helping to decide between a blue silk and a green one, and he was naturally wrathful (after it was over) at that loss of his valuable time.

"Innocent don't care for that sort of thing," said Jenny. "Has some one been hard upon her?—has some one worried her? I don't know what my mother means about our circumstances. I thought Innocent was to get the same as the rest of us. She

may have my share if that will keep her from marrying old Longueville. I don't see why she should want to marry any one ;—*I don't.*”

“How can I explain it to you?” said poor Mrs. Eastwood, “a girl is not like a young man. If anything was to happen to me, what would become of Innocent?—who would take care of her? You, or you? Dick, who is going to India, or Jenny who has his own way to make in the world,—or Nelly? Nelly will have some one else to consult——”

“You seem to put me out of the question altogether,” said Frederick, “though it seems to me I have a right to be considered——”

“You!—oh, Frederick!—when you know how impossible,—how out of all question that would be—— But Innocent has put it out of my hands, she has chosen Sir Alexis herself,—and when I think how much more he can give her than I ever could,—what advantages—what means of developing——”

“The fact is, women are all mercenary,” said Frederick, “they cannot help it. Money carries the day with them, whatever may be the drawbacks. I have long known it. Innocent is simple enough in other things,—but in this she is like all the rest.”

And thus the family conclave broke up,—even

Jenny, who was his mother's champion, being unable to see his way to her defence in this particular. Dick gave up the question with more light-heartedness, being unaffected by theories, but Jenny went back to Oxford somewhat melancholy, wondering if indeed "all women" were to be condemned wholesale,—or whether there would be any other meaning in the allusion to the circumstances which could be trusted to Sir Alexis. What these circumstances were, and the special mystery which enveloped poor Innocent, neither of the boys knew.

The effect, however, upon the world at large was very different. In the opinion of the Molyneuxes, for instance, Mrs. Eastwood rose to a far higher degree of estimation than they had ever bestowed upon her before. They even thought it might be as well that Ernest should be "settled," now that things had taken this turn. Nelly was not a bad match, all things considered, and to be married would probably settle Ernest, and the connexion was good. Besides, when the mother had done so well for her niece, a poor girl whom she had "shamefully neglected," what might she not aspire to for her daughter? I do not know that Ernest was stimulated in distinct words by these sentiments—but such feelings convey themselves otherwise than by words—and the

conviction came to his mind also that now was the moment to conclude his long probation, as he now chose to call it. "Don't you think I have been kept hanging on and waiting long enough?" he said to Nelly, whom he found immersed in Innocent's business, one morning, when, contrary to his habit, and very unexpectedly to them all, he sauntered into the drawing-room at The Elms.

"Kept hanging on?" said Nelly, with a surprise she did not attempt to conceal.

"Of course,—you don't suppose it is of my own will that I have waited for you like this,—almost as long as Jacob, eh, Nelly?—longer, I should say, considering how much faster things go now-a-days——"

"I did not know that you had ever tried to shorten it," said Nelly slowly, growing very red.

"I don't pretend to be able to subdue circumstances," said Molyneux; "we are all the victims of them, and I as much as other men. But it seems to me, Nelly, that now's our chance; now that Frederick has been providentially released from his encumbrance, and that your mother has made this triumphant stroke, and booked old Longueville for Innocent——"

"Ernest! I will not permit such words——"

"Well,—well,—don't let us quarrel about the

words—now that Sir Alexis is about to be made happy with the hand, &c. By Jove, you may say what you like, Nelly, but it is the cleverest *coup* I have heard of for a very long time. Altogether the family is in luck ; and if you play your cards well, and we can get hold of your mother when she is in a good humour——”

Poor Nelly's endurance had been greatly tried. Her troubles which she dared not confide to her lover—the sense that he could not be trusted to enter into the closer circle of her family anxieties, and consequently that his sympathy with herself could never be complete—had long been gnawing at her heart, and embittering all his careless words and irreverent thoughts. She turned red and then pale, tremulous and then rigid, in the passionate tumult of feeling which took possession of her ; but she kept herself calm with all her might, and answered him with an artificial coldness, which filled Molyneux half with ridicule, half with dismay.

“How am I to play my cards?” she said, “and what is it that you mean to ask from my mother when she is in a good humour?”

“Nelly!” he said, half laughing, half angry, “what does this tragedy-queen air portend ? surely it is a little late to get on stilts with me. Of course

you know as well as I do what I have to propose to your mother. We can't marry without her help; the responsibility lies upon her of keeping you from being settled and done for—I and my people are ready enough. When I talk of playing your cards, I take it for granted you want our business to be decided as much as I do,—and the very first step for us is to know how much she means to do.”

“I look at it in a different way,” said Nelly, plunging desperately into the centre of the question which she had so long avoided. “Ernest, now we must understand each other at last; I will not have any such proposal made to mamma. I will not!—it does not matter what you say. If we cannot do with what we have and your profession, it is better to put an end to it altogether. I have not wished for anything, nor thought of anything beyond what we could afford,” cried Nelly suddenly, the tears coming in spite of her,—“but I will not take our living from mamma!”

Molyneux was thunderstruck. “Why, Nelly!” he said, in the half-derisive, half-affectionate tone which had so often disarmed her,—you innocent little goose!” and he drew her within his arm. But Nelly was wrought to a point which did not admit of this treatment. She withdrew from his clasp, and

stood fronting him, tears in her eyes, but resolution in her face.

“We must understand each other,” she cried. “I have long tried to say it. Now I have had courage to speak, and I cannot go back. I will live as poorly as you like—if you like; but I will not fight with my own mother for money; I will not take our living from hers; I am determined. But I must not bind you,” she added, faltering slightly, “if you think otherwise.—If you think otherwise—if there is no other alternative—Ernest, I must set you free——”

“To speak to your mother?” he said, with a laugh in which there was some relief. “I should have done it without all this declamation, Nelly.”

“No,—but to be free from me,” said Nelly, folding closely together the hands which he tried to take.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNPOPULAR WEDDING.

THE marriage of Innocent took place on one of the first days of February, a day of the "seasonable" kind, with black skies, a dark gray atmosphere, and occasional downpours of steady rain. The raw cold penetrated to one's bones, and one's heart, and even the show of costly flowers which had been procured for the occasion failed to make the rooms look cheerful. Innocent herself, in her white bridal dress and veil, was like the snowdrops. Her head drooped a little, her cheeks were not much less pale than her dress. She was not a blushing, or a smiling, or a weeping bride. Her eyes were full of a certain awe, sometimes varied by alarm, when the prospect of leaving home came uppermost ; but she was passive in all things, gentle and grateful, as calm in her new position as she had been in the former. The only

one thing she had been anxious about, the one trouble and mystery in her life, had been set right (as she thought) by her bridegroom's exertions. He had taken upon him to arrange all that: to explain it, to make everything clear; and Innocent, trustful and ignorant, had not doubted his power to do so. Mrs. Eastwood's anxious assurances that she was mistaken, that her belief about Amanda was a delusion, had never made any impression on the girl. But when Sir Alexis accepted her story as true, and pledged himself to set everything right, the practical part of her mind, which was in reality the only intellectual part of her which had any power, accepted his assurances, and trusted in them. Why should any one bid her believe that it was a delusion? Innocent knew that it was no delusion; but at the same time she was quite simple enough and foolish to believe that Sir Alexis could set it all to rights, without inquiring how. He would give her a caressing answer when she asked him about it, and tell her that all was being settled; and in her ignorance she believed him, and was lightened of her burden. The wedding was to be a very quiet one, partly (as it was announced) because of Innocent's health—partly because of the mourning of the family. John Vane, who had been summoned

for the occasion, was to give her away as the representative of her father's family—for Frederick, morose and melancholy (feeling the death of his wife, poor fellow—for she was very beautiful, though it was quite a *mésalliance*), would have nothing to do with it. And a few of Mrs. Eastwood's friends and counsellors were in attendance, and two or three friends of Sir Alexis; but it was not a gay ceremonial. The Molyneuxes were present, for Ernest had not intimated to his family any doubt as to his eventual union with Nelly, nor had he accepted her virtual dismissal of him; but they, like many other people, after having received the announcement of the marriage with enthusiasm, had come prepared at the last moment to criticize.

"How could she allow that poor child to marry such a man?" whispered Miss Molyneux to her mother.

"Hush, child!" said the mother; "the Eastwoods are people who will do anything for money."

"How pale she is; do you think they can have used force?" the same young lady asked of Ernest.

"No more force than that of wealth and finery—a force women are always glad to yield to," said Ernest, almost in Nelly's hearing.

She heard the last words, and divined the first.

They had "made up" their quarrel, as people say, but Nelly's heart was very sore, quivering with pain present and pain past. Even the marriage itself was nothing to be happy about. How would poor Innocent bear it, when she was gone away from all who cared for her, with her old-new husband? How selfish it was of him, Nelly thought, to insist upon marrying Innocent, because in her trouble she had committed herself to him!—but all men were now selfish; they were not to be judged as women are. It came natural to them to consider themselves, their own will, their own gratification before everything else. This conviction was the bitter product of Nelly's own experience, which she endeavoured to soften by generalization, as men and women do invariably on both sides. All men were like that, she said to herself; it took off something of the sharp edge of self-seeking from the man whom she had herself chosen from all the world—or rather, who had chosen her, as he himself would have preferred to have said.

John Vane did not come to her until the weary morning was nearly over, till after the bride and bridegroom had departed, and the other guests were dropping away. The guests in general had not been cheerful in their comments; most of them had

expressed themselves warmly delighted at the prospect of so good a match for Innocent—but the compliments they paid to the mistress of the house now were not so agreeable.

“I am afraid poor little Lady Longueville is very delicate,” said one, shaking her head.

“Everything has gone off very nicely,” said another; “but I wish, poor thing, she had looked a little happier.”

“I don’t understand a bride looking very happy on her wedding day,” said a more benevolent critic; “and she is so young and so—inexperienced——”

“He has plenty of experience for both,” said a fourth.

“I should like to see that girl safe back from her wedding tour,” said Mrs. Everard, who was privileged to speak her mind. “She looks to me a great deal too like a Lucia di Lammermoor, my dear. She wanted nothing but her hair down, and a confidant in white muslin. I hope he will take care of her.”

“There can be no doubt that he will take every care of her,” said Mrs. Eastwood, who was tired and irritated. “That was my great comfort in giving my consent.”

“Well, at all events, the responsibility is off your

hands," said Mrs. Everard, nodding her head half in congratulation, half in pity.

Thus the marriage was set down on all hands as a mercenary match made by Mrs. Eastwood, of which poor Innocent was the victim. Her very sons thought so; and with better reason John Vane thought so, whom she had thought of as her counsellor, and whose moral support would have done her good. But how was he to judge, except as other people did, from the surface? and Mrs. Eastwood felt that she must bear it all, and dared not say anything in her own defence. John Vane was cold and grave, even to Nelly. He seemed to intend to go away without speaking to any one, beyond the ordinary civilities; but something in Nelly's face seemed to bring him back from the door, when he had all but taken his leave. He approached her reluctantly, she thought, and his manner was not as of old. He told her he was sorry he had not known of this sooner—that it must all have been arranged very suddenly—and that he would have been glad to have been consulted about a matter so important to his poor little cousin's happiness.

"We should have liked more time too," said Nelly, in her turn indignant; "but Innocent settled

it all by herself, and Sir Alexis insisted that there should be no delay."

"Innocent settled it all by herself?"

"Yes, Mr. Vane; it looks very strange, but it is true. I see you blame poor mamma, who never was a matchmaker in her life; but it was Innocent who settled everything. I hate it," said Nelly, with warmth, "and when she sees what she has done—poor Innocent! But he is a kind man," she added, more calmly, "and he will be very good to her, as mamma says."

"I do not understand Innocent," said Vane. "They told me a very strange story at Sterborne—"

"A story—about what?" said Nelly, growing breathless with excitement and terror.

"She seems to have gone home in so strange a way, so suddenly, so oddly altogether," he said, with an uneasy look. And yet she is not *really* an idiot—only odd. I am very sorry for my sister's sake—it has disturbed her so much. Indeed, I often regret deeply that I took Innocent to the High Lodge."

"Oh, if you had not done so!" cried Nelly, with that horrible perception of how a whole world of trouble might have been avoided, which comes so often after the event. "Oh, if you had not done it!"

Then she restrained herself, as he could see, with a sudden movement of alarm.

“There is something behind that I do not know,” said Vane, looking at her.

“Oh, no, no, pray don’t think so! She was frightened and nervous: that was all,” cried Nelly.

How she longed to tell him, to set him right in his injurious opinion, to vindicate her mother and herself! Few of the only denials of life are equal to this, when men or women are compelled by honour to abandon their honour to public comment, and to accept blame which is not justly theirs. Vane looked at her curiously, even with something like anxiety; but he remained silent. He was confounded by all that had happened; and offended by the complete want of confidence shown by them. And what could he say beyond what had been said?—that Innocent had been permitted, or perhaps induced, forced, the bolder spirits said, into a mercenary match which she did not wish; which she was passive in, if not less than passive? Vane stood silently by Nelly’s side, for some time, wondering, trying to think what the secret could be—what extenuating circumstances might exist. At least, he concluded to himself, Nelly could not be to blame. She could have nothing to do with the

matter ; one young girl would not help to force another on that painful road. Nelly, at the worst, must have been herself passive ; perhaps she was herself fated to be the next victim. Vane watched curiously the greetings between her and the Molyneuxes, as this thought passed through his mind. The *aigre-doux* of their salutations was unchanged ; they were not warmer than before, nor more familiar ; it was evident that no change had taken place, there, in the position of affairs. He thought it was evident (looking again at Nelly herself) that she was not more happy than she had been. Why had not Mrs. Eastwood exerted herself to further her daughter's prospects, instead of thus fatally deciding poor Innocent's ? He went away at last with his mind in a very uncomfortable state ; grieved for Innocent, troubled about Nelly, wondering and confused altogether. The only thing he was sure of was another generalization, such as in all similar cases men find it safe to take refuge in—that it must be the mother's fault. She it was who must have “managed” and schemed for the one gilded unhappiness, and who must be permitting, for her own ends, the other. Poor Mrs. Eastwood ! this was all the reward she got for her much anxiety and motherly care.

Another incident had occurred a few days before, which she had confided to no one but Nelly, and which had seriously disturbed her. Jane, the housemaid, whose quiet demeanour had lulled all her fears to rest, had come to her suddenly, and demanded to be promoted to the post of lady's maid to the future Lady Longueville.

"Lady's maid! you, Jane? but you don't understand the duties," Mrs. Eastwood had said, in consternation.

"Oh, ma'am, I know a deal as no one thinks of," said Jane significantly, with a look that froze the blood in her mistress's veins.

"That may be, perhaps," Mrs. Eastwood said, trying to cover her confusion with a nervous laugh; "but you do not know how to make dresses, or how to do hair—or any of a maid's special duties. Household work is a different sort of thing."

"My friends has told me to apply for the place," said Jane, "and them as knows thinks me well qualified. They say as how I have the best right. I knows a deal more than any one thinks for," the woman repeated doggedly, like a lesson she had learned by rote.

A swift calculation passed through Mrs. Eastwood's mind—was it better to keep this dangerous

knowledge within her own reach, where she could prevent its evil use, or try to prevent it? or, on the other hand, would Jane be safer within the steady grasp of Sir Alexis, who would stand between Innocent and harm? It was a difficult question to settle in a moment. Mrs. Eastwood leaped at the more generous decision; she took the burden on herself.

"I have no wish to part with you," she said diplomatically; "but if you want to better yourself, to try another kind of place, I shall be glad to let you try how you can get on with Miss Ellinor at home. For Lady Longueville, I should like a person of more experience to begin with. You can speak to my daughter about it, if you please."

"But, ma'am," Jane was beginning, pertinaciously.

"No more just now—I am busy. After the wedding I shall have more time," said Mrs. Eastwood. But this interview gave her another ache in her heart.

All these things concurred to make the wedding day a painful one. As the family were in mourning, and as the wedding had been so quiet, they had excused themselves from any further festivities in the evening: and who does not know how dismal is the languid close of the day, when all is over, after the

excitement of the morning, and of the busy days preceding, when there was so much to do? Dick sauntered about the garden with his weddingfavour still on his coat, shedding bits of wedding-cake all over his path, which Winks, following at his heels, condescended to pick up, though Winks had not approved of the wedding any more than the rest of the family. Winks had never had any opinion of Sir Alexis. A connoisseur, fond of art, of dainty furniture, and fine gardens, has seldom much sympathy with the four-footed visitor, whose appreciation of the finest collection is generally somewhat contemptuous, to say the least. Winks retired to a corner when Sir Alexis visited The Elms. He declined to take any notice of him. "He is not in my style," the little cynic said, very plainly; and he retired from his usual leading part in the family life while this objectionable visitor remained. Other events that day had combined to derange Winks's temper, and wound him in his tenderest feelings. Mr. Justice Molyneux (for the Q.C. was now a Judge) had attempted to give him a kick in the hall, where Winks was contemplating the arrival of the guests with much dignity; Mrs. Everard had trodden on the flowing fringes of his tail; he had been hustled out of his favourite chair,

and interfered with in all his usual habits. Winks was very tolerant when this sort of thing happened in the evening. He accepted the fact of a ball with a certain benevolent interest, and wagged his tail condescendingly at the young people, bidding them enjoy themselves, before he went off on three feet, like the philosopher he was, to enjoy tranquillity in the one comfortable chair in the library, congratulating himself that dogs do not dance. But a ball, or something like a ball in the morning, was a mystery to Winks. He thought he had got rid of all that crowd of unnecessary people when they went off to the church; but to see them come back in full daylight, not twelve o'clock, and fill the room once more, was beyond the endurance even of a philosopher. He was so far disturbed out of his ordinary calm as to bark indignantly when the bride and bridegroom went away, and a few of the livelier spirits in the party, headed by Dick, threw old shoes after them. Winks read Dick a lecture on the subject afterwards. He looked at him with a mixture of reproach and contempt, as he stood in the hall, with his hands full of old slippers. He was too much disgusted even to follow his young master back into the house, when the carriage drove away, but shook his head and marched off

round the side-walk into the garden, feeling that such absurdity was not to be borne. I cannot quite explain how it was that he condescended to pick up the bits of wedding-cake; perhaps with a thrifty idea that it was best they should not be lost; or perhaps he was satisfied that Dick was ashamed of himself, and saw the familiar book in his pocket, which was Dick's signal-flag, and intimation to all concerned that he had returned to the duties of ordinary life.

"It was fun, though, by Jove, to see that old slipper with the high heel hit Longueville on his old nose," Dick said, with a laugh, as he held up a larger bit of cake than usual; and Winks, mollified, grinned in acknowledgment of the joke. He made one round of the garden after the cake was finished, to show that he was not mercenary, and then trotted indoors, where, providentially, all was now quiet. The family were assembled in the drawing-room, where, though the chairs and tables had been put in their usual places, there was still an air of excitement, and a sentiment of disorder. Winks came in and set himself down in front of the fire, and looked at them all. "What do you think of your handiwork, now it is finished?" he seemed to say severely looking at his mistress, curling up one black lip

over his white teeth; he would not condescend to wag his tail.

"Oh, Winks, don't look so diabolical," said Nelly, trying to laugh; perhaps it was as good a way of relieving her feelings as crying would have been.

"Don't sneer, you brute!" cried Jenny, indignant. Winks fixed upon them all a look of contemptuous disapproval: and then trotted off to a chair at the window. They were not even amusing in their exhaustion—he preferred his own company to theirs.

After a while Jenny followed Winks's example.

"What a bore a wedding is," he said, stretching himself, "in the morning, leaving one's afternoon on one's hands. I shall go out for a walk till dinner."

"Don't go out in the rain with your cold, dear," said Mrs. Eastwood.

"Pshaw! what's a cold?" said Jenny. The rain was nothing to the chill discouragement and inarticulate, vague misery which seemed to fill the house from garret to basement. A sense of unhappiness which he did not know how to struggle against was in Jenny's own mind. Nothing uncomfortable had happened to him in his personal career. He had pleasant rooms, was in a good set, and fortune

smiled upon him. Nevertheless he too was duly miserable, as the house was ; he did not know why. He was too young for sentiment, or, at least, too boyish and defiant of sentiment, to take himself to task in the matter, or ascertain what ailed him. Perhaps even the boy was wise enough not to wish to come to any clear conclusion in the matter ; but he was dull, dull as ditch-water, according to his own simile.

They were all going to a dance at Mrs. Barclay's that night, which was some relief. She was full of triumph and exultation in the event which had brought so little comfort to the Eastwoods. She had asked everybody—the Molyneuxes, who were to be "connexions," through Nelly, and John Vane, who was already her "connexion," through Innocent—and all the *habitués* of The Elms. Jenny spent the time till dinner in a wretched walk, and came in drenched, with his cold considerably increased, which, on the whole, he was rather glad of ; and Mrs. Eastwood, yielding to the general misery of the circumstances, at last, went "to lie down"—an indulgence unknown to her on ordinary occasions. Dick went to his own room, where Winks, on being whistled for five times, condescended to follow him ; and they two, I think, had the best of it. Frederick

had sole possession of the library, where he sat over the fire with his feet on the grate, and a countenance which was dark as the sky. And Nelly went to poor Innocent's room and put things tidy with her own hands, and cried over the little empty white bed, as if Innocent had died. A wretched day, rain outside, cold dulness and misery within ; but if people will marry in February, what else can be looked for ? for the home of the bride is seldom a very cheerful habitation on the evening of the wedding day.

CHAPTER X.

AFTER THE WEDDING.

THE ball at Mrs. Barclay's was brilliant, and the Eastwood family were, as was natural, the most honoured guests. And I suppose that Nelly and her brothers, being young, enjoyed themselves, as the phrase is, and were able to cast off their melancholy. Dick at least was perfectly able to cast it off, the more especially as he met the reigning lady of his affections—the girl whom he had many thoughts of asking to go out with him to India—thoughts which were tempered by the wholesome fear of having his proposal treated with much contumely as a boy's fancy at home. He danced with her half the evening, and sat out with her on the crowded staircase, and consumed much ice and lemonade in her company, and was very happy. Jenny, who had not been properly looked after in his dancing when

he was young, and was very doubtful of his own steadiness in a waltz, stalked about the rooms and talked to the people he knew, and said it was a great bore, yet was vaguely exhilarated, as one is when under twenty, by the crowd, and the lights, and the music. Frederick, of course, being still in the first gloom of his widowhood, did not come. And as for Nelly, though she expected nothing but to be miserable, she too found the evening pass off much less disagreeably than she anticipated. Molyneux, somewhat frightened by the decided stand she had made, and piqued by the possibility of rejection after all, was more constantly at her side than he had been since the early days of their engagement; and Vane, looking more friendly than in the morning, asked her to dance with him, on purpose it would seem to make up for his former coldness. He kept aloof from Mrs. Eastwood, but he sought Nelly. "If you'll accept so poor a partner," he said; "my dancing days are about over."

"I do not see why that should be," said Nelly, looking brightly up at him, pleased to hear his voice soften into its old tone.

"Ah, pardon, I do," he said with a smile, "I am growing old. I shall go and set up a monkery one of these days beside my sister's nunnery. I am not

like Longueville ; no means are afforded to me of renewing my youth."

"But you are not old, like Sir Alexis," cried Nelly.

"Not like Sir Alexis; but old—tolerably old in years—a great deal older in heart."

"Oh, how wrong you are!" said Nelly; "on the contrary, you are young. I am a bystander, and I can see better than you can. You are a great deal younger than many who are—not so old as you are." Her eyes went wandering over the room as she spoke, and John Vane made out in his own mind that she was looking for Molyneux—a thing which I cannot take upon me to affirm.

"You give me consolation," he said, shaking his head; "and, indeed, I am young enough to be very foolish, and as curious as a child. I wonder now—you are honest, Miss Eastwood, and say what you think—I wonder if you would tell me the real cause of poor little Innocent's marriage, and all her odd ways?"

Nelly's countenance changed in spite of herself, and in her mind there rose a painful debate. Should she make him some conventional answer, evading his question? or should she answer him in sincerity? After all, she could harm no one by honesty, though

it would make her answer unsatisfactory. She looked at him gravely, trying to frame her reply so as to reveal nothing? and then the natural honesty to which he had appealed gained the upper hand.

"Mr. Vane," she said hurriedly, "if I tell you that I cannot tell you, will you be satisfied? It is a strange way to answer, perhaps, but I cannot do any more. Perhaps some time—but just now I cannot. There is a reason," she said, growing more agitated. "Oh, please do not take advantage of my wish to tell you, and make me say more."

"Do you wish to tell me?" he said, touched in spite of all his prejudices.

"Yes," she cried, "and so did mamma. If we could but have seen you before she went to Sir Alexis; you were the first person we thought of; we have always felt we could trust you. Ah, don't make me say any more!"

"I will not," he said gravely. The anxious appeal in her face filled John Vane with many feelings, the foremost of which perhaps did not concern Innocent. "Confound the fellow!" he said within himself, as he had done many times before; and it was not Longueville he meant. They were silent for the rest of the dance through which this very serious conversation ran, but Nelly felt that the cloud between herself

and her friend had passed away. He was a true friend, more to be trusted perhaps than some others who were really more important in her life. Nelly reflected to herself that, after all, this serious position of counsellor if possible—of sympathizer when counsel was not possible—was rather a friend's place than a lover's. A lover (said Nelly to herself) is less concerned with your family and affairs, and more with you. He wants you to enter into his concerns, not he into yours; he is more fond of you, and therefore more exacting. It is you—you—he wants. He thinks nothing of so much importance as to have you to himself. This thought brought a blush upon her cheek, and some small degree of momentary comfort to her heart. It was flattering, at least—for passion is at all times a better excuse than indifference. But John Vane saw clearly, with eyes unblinded by passion—he was clear-sighted enough to see that something was wrong, and being a good kind friend only, not a lover, tried to show his sympathy, and to help if that should be possible. In this point of view a friend might be more satisfactory—more consolatory than a lover; but still friendship and love were very different things. This was the argument that went through Nelly's mind in the frivolous atmosphere of the ballroom, and

while she was dancing with some indifferent person who was neither friend nor lover. "Yes, the rooms are very pretty, Mrs. Barclay has a great deal of taste," she said through the midst of her thoughts. "She is very nice indeed, always good-natured and kind. The Longuevilles are coming back for the season to their house in Kensington. They will not go to Italy till next winter." This kind of prattle can go on very easily on the surface of much graver thoughts.

"What were you talking to John Vane about?" said Ernest, when his turn came.

"About Innocent," said Nelly quietly.

"About Innocent! It must be very pleasant to have such an interesting subject. You looked as if your whole hearts were in it—he asking and you replying. An indifferent spectator might have thought the subject of discussion more personal," said Molyneux, with an angry countenance.

"Innocent is very interesting to me," said Nelly, with spirit, "and also to Mr. Vane. Though you do not care for her, Ernest, that is not to say that I must become indifferent to my cousin. She has need of her friends, poor child!"

"Poor child!" said Ernest; "I like that. She has just made one of the best matches going, and got

herself established as very few girls do, I can tell you. She has carried her innocence to an excellent market, Nelly. I don't see why her fortunes should call forth so much sympathetic discussion, especially between you and John Vane. I detest the fellow, putting himself forward on all occasions. Who wants his interference, I should like to know?"

"I do!" cried Nelly bravely, "and so does mamma. He is the only one of her relations who has taken any interest in Innocent. We should both be distressed beyond measure if he did not interfere."

"Confound Innocent!" said Molyneux, under his breath. "Why there should be all this fuss about a half-witted girl is more than I can say; especially now, when she is off your mother's hands, Nelly. Our own affairs are more interesting to me."

"Yes, clearly," Nelly said to herself, "a lover is very different. What he wants is to have you to himself, not necessarily to please *you*;" but she suppressed the retort which rose to her lips. She had no desire, however, to prolong her dance, or to go out to the conservatory, or even the staircase, where Dick was in Elysium, and which she herself on other occasions had found very pleasant. "I would rather go to mamma," she said. "We are

both tired, and I think we must go early. A wedding is a very fatiguing business."

"A wedding is a very tiresome business, especially if one never hears the end of it," said Ernest, and he left Nelly by her mother's side with considerable dudgeon. Though poor Nelly had explained it all to herself so philosophically, and had even felt herself flattered by her own definition of the peculiarities of a lover, she could have cried as she sat down by her mother. She was prettily dressed, and her eyes were bright, and altogether her aspect was such as to justify Mrs. Barclay's plaudits, who declared her, if not the prettiest, at least one of the very prettiest girls present; but if she could have cried with vexation and mortification and chill disappointment, it would have done her all the good in the world. Instead of crying, however, she had to smile, and to look pleased when Mrs. Barclay brought some new piece of emptiness up to her with a simper on its countenance and a flower in its coat. "You must not really go yet. I cannot have Nelly carried off in the midst of the fun," said Mrs. Barclay; "how can you be so hard-hearted?" and Nelly's mother had to smile too, and yield. Such things, I suppose, will happen at balls everywhere, now and then, till the end of the world.

After this great event there followed another lull—a lull of strange calm and quiet, almost incomprehensible to the family after the curious interval of suppressed excitement through which they had passed, and which seemed to have made an atmosphere of secrecy and mystery congenial to them. Jenny returned to Oxford; Dick, who was approaching his final examination, was once more kept to his work by every one in the house with a zeal which his mother, who began now to feel the separation approaching, felt almost cruel, though, moved by stern force of duty, she herself was foremost in the effort. The only comfort in the matter Dick himself felt was, that after this there would be no more Exams.—a fond hope in which, as the better-instructed reader knows, a Competition Wallah, with all the horrors of Tamil and Telugu before him, would soon discover himself to be disappointed. In the meantime an additional torment was added to him, in being recommended by everybody who “took an interest” in his success, to read books about India in the few leisure hours which hitherto had been dissipated by the aid of Mr. Mudie. Dick did not object to “Tara: a Mahratta Tale;” but he kicked at the history and travels in India which Mrs. Everard disinterred from her shelves for his

benefit. "I shall make out all about it when I get there," he said piteously. "Why should a fellow be compelled to remember every hour of the day that he is going to India? I shan't have home so very much longer. You may let me have a little peace as long as I am here." At this speech the tears would mount to Mrs. Eastwood's eyes, and Winks would come down from his favourite chair, and place himself before Dick, and wag his tail sympathetically. When Dick continued, "Confound India! I wish it was at the bottom of the sea," Winks sat up solemnly and waved his feathery forepaws at his young master. What he meant by this last proceeding—whether to entreat him not to be too pathetic, or to mock satirically at his self-pity—no one knew: there are moments of mystery in all characters of any depth; some men are angry when they are in trouble—some fictitiously gay when they are angry. All that can be said is, that Winks expressed his feelings thus when his sympathy got beyond the reach of ordinary expression, and the effect upon Dick, at least, was always soothing and consolatory. "I won't, old fellow, since you make such a point of it," he would say; and then Mrs. Eastwood would laugh to hide her crying. In this way Winks found his way to the very depths of their hearts, becoming a creature of

domestic emotion, half humorous, yet all-penetrating in its pathos.

Other matters, too, besides Dick's training, began to ripen towards a crisis. Mr. Justice Molyneux had, as has been said, gained that elevation which all his friends had foreseen for him, and the family had proportionally risen in importance, and it had become a matter of general remark among the friends of both parties that the engagement between Nelly and Ernest had lasted quite long enough. "What are they waiting for?" everybody said. Most people had a high opinion of the young man's powers, if he could only be prevailed upon to set to work. His articles in the *Piccadilly* were a proof that he could express himself as forcibly and much more elegantly than his father, who in his day had been a perfect master of the British jury, and whose summings-up were now cited as models of clear-headedness—not elegant—the judge had never gone in for elegance—but forcible and clear in the highest degree. The son of such a father, with the powers which Ernest was known to possess, and with all the advantages derived from his position, could not fail to have a fine career before him. "What are they waiting for?" Mr. Parchemin, who was Mrs. Eastwood's financial adviser, one day took upon him

to say. "These long engagements are always doubtful things, but sometimes there may be occasion for them—a clergyman for instance. But in this case there seems no reason. You must pardon me for my plain speaking, as I have always taken an interest in Nelly. But what are they waiting for?"

"I suppose," said Mrs. Eastwood, who was sore on this subject, "till Mr. Molyneux has fairly entered upon his career."

"His career! My dear madam, a career does not come to such a man. He must go and look after it," said Mr. Parchemin. I should have offered my services—any little interest I have with the solicitors—long ago, if I had not thought it quite unnecessary in the cause of his father's son."

"I am afraid I cannot interfere," said Mrs. Eastwood. "I don't wish to get rid of my daughter."

"But, my dear madam, you prefer her being comfortably settled, I suppose?" said the financial counsellor. And, indeed, he expressed the opinions of all Mrs. Eastwood's advisers. Mrs. Everard was still more decided and emphatic. "I should speak to him, and ask him what he means," she said; "I should not put up with any shilly-shally. Nelly's happiness ought to be a great deal more to you than

any nonsensical scruples of delicacy. I should ask him what he means."

"I do not hold Nelly so cheap," cried Mrs. Eastwood, with a little flush of anger. "I think the best man in the world is not too good for Nelly. And he ought to ask her from me, not compel me to thrust her upon him. No, not if he was the only man in the world!"

"For my part, I should not be so scrupulous," said Mrs. Everard; "I would not stand on my dignity when my child's happiness was involved. If Nelly likes him, she should have him—or I would know the reason why!"

"One can only act according to one's nature," said Mrs. Eastwood, less amenable than usual to her friend's persuasions. But the fact that everybody did remark and wonder made her doubly angry with herself and every one. Ought she to have offered sacrifices on her own part, to secure, as was the phrase, her child's happiness? Ought she to have taken the initiative without thus waiting, with a sense of proud repugnance, for the "other side"? Was she risking Nelly's happiness? These questions Mrs. Eastwood asked herself with a troubled heart. Nelly meanwhile went on tranquilly with her usual life, and made no sign. Sometimes she would

reddden, sometimes grow pale, when Ernest came as usual. He came always, but not so regularly as of old, and it seemed to Mrs. Eastwood that Nelly's expectations of his coming were not always pleasant; she was as quick to recognize his ring at the door, and to know his step, as ever, but no flush of joy came upon her face when she heard them. Quite as often a line of embarrassment, of anxiety, of incipient pain appeared on her forehead. The long engagement, was it?—or something else? Certainly, as day by day went on, Nelly grew more and more like one who drags a lengthening chain.

Jane, the housemaid, the most insignificant member of the household, became also at this time an embarrassment and trouble. With a strong desire to keep everything quiet, and hope that it might be accomplished, Mrs. Eastwood had recommended Nelly to make experiment of her powers as lady's-maid; and Nelly, half reluctant, had consented. "I hear you want to try another kind of situation," Nelly said to her. "Come and help me while I dress, and then I shall be able to tell mamma what you can do."

"It ain't that, I want another sort of situation—I want to be maid to my lady," said Jane.

"Well, it would be much finer, of course, than

being maid to me," said Nelly, laughing; "but you had better try your skill on me first. If we come to grief it will not be of so much consequence." This she said merrily, being less impressed than her mother was, and much less than the young woman herself was, with Jane's harm-doing powers.

"That ain't my meaning, miss," said Jane very solemnly; "I mightn't know enough for you, but I knows plenty for my lady. It's a different thing. My friends all tell me as it's my own fault if my fortune's not made. I knows enough for my Lady Longueville—ay, and more than enough, if all was said."

"It seems to me you are rather impertinent," said Nelly, reddening. "I don't know what you mean by it. I will take you on trial if you like, because mamma wishes it; but Lady Longueville, you may be sure, will not have you, unless you give proof of your knowledge more satisfactory than words."

"Oh, there's sometimes a deal of use in words, Miss," said Jane oracularly. Nelly went down-stairs fuming to her mother, demanding that she should be sent away.

"Send away Jane! Nelly, you are crazy. I might have let her go with Innocent, trusting that Sir Alexis would be able to manage her; but other-

wise she must stay under my own eye. Think, Nelly, what she knows ! She heard what Innocent said, every word."

"She is very impertinent," said Nelly. "If you keep her she will grow more and more so, and one day or other she will do the worst she can. Why should you pay any attention to her? Send her away, and let her do her worst!"

"Not for the world!" cried her mother. They had an argument about it which almost came to a quarrel; but the result was that Nelly was vanquished, and Jane stayed.

CHAPTER XI.

THE GATHERING OF THE STORM.

SOME time after the above events, Frederick's little house in Mayfair—which had been the only advantage poor Amanda had gained by marrying him, and which had been furnished according to her taste, in a somewhat showy, modern fashion, with dashes of ill-considered and ill-fitting antiquity—became vacant. The tenant who had taken it for the winter months gave it up at the end of February ; as it had proved a somewhat profitable investment, Frederick, who had a lease of the house, decided on letting it again, furnished. A little more money is never a matter of indifference to a young man with expensive tastes, and he was very willing to add to his income in this way. Before the house was let again, however, it was necessary that all the personal lumber Mrs. Frederick had left behind her should

be cleared away. Her trunks, which had been placed in one locked up room, her knick-knacks, the trifles with which she had filled her drawing-room, had to be put in order, and either restored to their places or distributed to her friends. Frederick found his mother and sister quite averse to the office of looking over Amanda's "things." Her clothes and her finery were objects in which they took no interest, except the pitiful and painful one which now encompassed everything she had possessed. But they would neither accept this melancholy, tawdry inheritance which she had left behind her, for themselves, nor did they feel any inclination to take upon them the office of arbitrators and distributors among her friends. He sent for aunty in his perplexity from Sterborne. He had sworn to have nothing to do with the family henceforward, but in this strait he did not hesitate. Aunty came up to London on his application, almost by return of post. The dead woman's finery was all interesting to her. She had a pleasure in trying it on, in estimating its value, in selecting some for herself, in laying aside various articles for other friends. The office pleased aunty immensely: and as this sad but satisfactory piece of business entailed the necessity of a prolonged visit to town,—where she lived in Frederick's house

“like a lady,” with two maids to serve her, and a room for a friend, and the most congenial occupation—it is not wonderful that she should have regarded it with pleasure. It pleased Batty too that his son-in-law, whom he described in his own circle as being proud as Lucifer, yet acknowledged in this way the existence and the claims of his wife’s family. He sent a friendly message by aunty to the effect that he himself would soon pay Frederick a visit. He had begun to recover the shock of his daughter’s death. Marriage had already separated her from him, and such grief as his does not resist the softening influence of time and circumstances. Frederick’s “attention” flattered and pleased him,—and Frederick’s family was always something to brag of. Even Innocent’s marriage was a feather in Mr. Batty’s cap,—“My poor girl’s cousin,” he called her. He was most amiable to the Eastwoods, who had showed, he said, every respect to his girl. It was only when any appearance of indifference to Amanda’s memory displayed itself that his violence of grief returned. When some one suggested that his son-in-law would soon marry again, his face clouded over; “Confound him! if he can forget my girl so soon!” he cried; but Frederick’s appeal to aunty mollified him entirely. “He was

bound up in my poor girl, was Frederick Eastwood," he said after that. And during the winter he had been afflicted with rheumatism, and with brandy and water, as bad a form of disease; therefore he had not gone to town, nor put his son-in-law's friendliness to the test. But the invitation to aunty opened the door to further intimacy; so Frederick did not intend,—but so Batty thought.

It was a disappointment to both of these personages to find that their host was not really their host, and that in reality it was an empty house in which they were sent to live. The table was indeed supplied at Frederick's cost, and he himself was guiltless of any idea that he was not doing everything that could be required of him; but Amanda's relations were sensitive. Then, too, the maids were not so respectful as aunty felt they ought to have been. They judged her, I suppose, as we are all disposed to do, by her appearance, and were not careful to do their service according to the strict measure of their duty. She had expected to go to Frederick's house to become for the time his housekeeper and virtual mistress of his dwelling—to be supreme over the servants, and have the management in her hands—perhaps to drive out in the brougham which Amanda had told her of; and thus to relieve

her heavier labours by a few London sights of such as had not for a long time been afforded to her. As for Batty, though he intended his visit to be a short one, he too expected to be Frederick's guest, to see Frederick's friends, to go with him to his club, and to pick up at least a few names which he could in the future produce among his friends as "cronies of my son-in-law's." He had no intention of being hard upon Frederick. He already knew, and had known before Amanda's reign commenced, that the morality of the young man was far from perfect. If he had discovered new traces of indulgences similar to those he had witnessed in Paris, he would have thought the poor fellow excusable, and would have made every allowance for him. But it was a very different thing to arrive in Frederick's empty house—to be received by aunty alone, whose society he did not prize highly—to have a dinner served up to him imperfectly cooked, the maids not caring to put themselves out of the way for such guests—to be shown into a bedroom partially dismantled, and in which no particular preparations for his comfort had been thought necessary. "By George! What does it all mean?" he said. "It means that Frederick Eastwood don't think us good enough for his company," said aunty, who was much galled by the want of reverence for

herself shown by the servants. "Well, well," said Batty, persevering in his good-humour, "I daresay he's got other things to think of. I'll set all that right to-morrow." In his heart he concluded that Frederick's reluctance to set up house with aunt was natural enough, but his own presence would alter all that. He put up with it accordingly the first night. He went to look at his daughter's dresses hung up to the air in best bedroom, and his heart softened more and more. "I don't doubt now as my poor girl was very happy here," he said, looking round upon all the fittings of the room which had been hers. They were of a kind which he considered luxurious—as such they had been chosen by *her*. No want of "respect" was visible in this bower, which she had fitted up for herself. He went to his own room after this inspection, melancholy and slightly maudlin, but satisfied, and had a little more brandy and water, and concluded that next day he should see Frederick and set all right.

Next day, however, things were not set right. He went to the Sealing Wax Office, and found that his son-in-law was out. Frederick was no longer afraid of him, and the senility of fear was over for ever in his mind. Before his marriage he would not have dared to be out of the way when a man

commanding the secret of his life called upon him ; but everybody knew now what a mistake and *mésalliance* poor Eastwood had made, and how he had been providentially delivered from it. Batty, gradually growing furious, proceeded in the afternoon to The Elms, to call upon the ladies. He saw, or thought he saw them at the window, as he drove to the door in his Hansom, and was about to enter with familiar freedom as a connexion of the family, when Brownlow stopped him solemnly with a "Not at home, sir."

"Not at home !" cried Batty, "I saw them at the window. Take in my name, my good fellow. I am not a stranger. Your mistress will see me."

"My mistress is out," said Brownlow solemnly—which was true to the letter, as Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly had escaped by the garden door at sight of the visitor, and were now deep in the recesses of the Lady's Walk.

Batty looked at him like an infuriated bull—his face growing red, and his eyes projected out of his head. "By Jove, sir, you shall smart for this !" he cried in spite of himself.

Brownlow held his ground with all the imperturbability of a well-trained serving man.

"Not at home, sir," he repeated steadily. "Perhaps you would like, sir, to leave a message? My mistress will be in to dinner."

Batty closed the door of his Hansom with a crash that rang through the whole neighbourhood. He drove off furious. But still, after all the business of the day was done, he returned to the little house in Mayfair, feeling it impossible that Frederick could have the audacity to leave him another evening alone. He found aunty again by herself, almost weeping over the insolence of the maids, with another careless dinner, indifferent service—together a contemptuous mode of treatment. "Hang me if I stand this!" he said, making off, as soon as he had eaten his badly-cooked meal, to his son-in-law's club, resolute to find him, one way or another, and "to have it out with him." Aunty remained behind in equally high dudgeon. She said to herself that "these Eastwoods" must have suborned the servants to be insolent to her. Thus, in the most unconsidered and, so to speak, innocent way, did this unfortunate family forge against themselves the thunderbolt which was to strike them almost into social ruin. Frederick had certainly meant to avoid his wife's relations, but not with any such determined and insolent purpose as Batty gave him credit for; and

Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly did, indeed, run out of the house in order to avoid receiving the visit of Amanda's father, but only from the impulse of the moment, without any concerted plan. And when it was done, compunctions rose within the breasts of the ladies. Mrs. Eastwood accused herself of her fault at dinner on the same night.

"Should you like me to call on—Miss Johnson, Frederick?" she said. "I am sorry that Nelly and I were so foolish. I am sure I have often received people I had as little sympathy with as Mr. Batty. Indeed, poor man, I have a great deal of sympathy with him. Should you like me to call on Miss Johnson?"

"Who on earth is Miss Johnson?" cried Frederick. "Aunty, do you mean? Why should you call on her? She has not any social pretensions, that I know of. Poor soul, to do her justice, she never went in for that sort of thing."

"Then you think I need not call?" Mrs. Eastwood said, with a look of relief; "I confess I would rather not. Brownlow," she said, after some time, "you will find a parcel in the library, addressed to Miss Johnson, at Mr. Eastwood's. Will you take it to-night, or to-morrow morning? Leave it with my compliments, and say I hope to have the

pleasure of calling before she leaves town. Perhaps it is better to say that," added the diplomatist. "Things might occur to prevent our having the pleasure—but it is as well not to offend any one, unless we cannot help it." She said this without the least idea that anything more than a breach of her own perfect good manners could be involved in offending the Batty family. She had wounded her own sense of right and wrong by avoiding Batty's visit. It did not occur to her to think what effect her "rudeness" might have produced on him.

The parcel in the library contained a few books, some music, a fan, and a handkerchief, left at various times by Amanda at The Elms. Brownlow grumbled slightly as he went down-stairs, at this commission.

"If a man is to be kept running of errands all day long, 'ow is 'is work to get down?" said Brownlow.

Jane, the housemaid, not generally considered very "ready to oblige," answered this appeal at once.

"It's a fine evening," she said, "and I'd like a walk. I'll take 'em for you, Mr. Brownlow, and leave the message. My work's done, and I'm sick of needlework. Don't say a word about it. I'd like the walk."

"There's some one a-waiting, I make no doubt, under the lamp-post," said Brownlow; and Jane had to bear the brunt of some raillery, such as abounds in the regions down-stairs. She took it very calmly, making no protestations.

"There may be half-a-dozen under the lamp-post, for what I know," said Jane.

Thus the matter arranged itself with the utmost simplicity. Never did messenger of evil leave a household more unsuspecting. Mrs. Eastwood had as little conception of what was in preparation as had the innocent Brownlow, who would have walked to the end of the world rather than accept this fatal substitute, had he known. But neither he knew, nor any one. The soft spring air caressed Nelly's face as she looked out from the hall window, wondering if any one was coming, and saw Jane's dark figure passing through the gate; just as softly it caressed the countenance of Jane herself, on her way to spread havoc and consternation. But the girl at the window had no fear, and the girl at the door only an excited sense of importance. Jane had not even any very bad meaning, so far as she was aware. She was bursting with the something which she had to tell; this could not but bring some advantage to herself, she thought; as for the dis-

advantage to others, she did not realize to what length that might go, or feel that its greatness would overbalance the importance and benefit to come to her. On this point her imagination altogether failed her. I believe, for my own part, that imagination is the first faculty wanting in those that do harm to their kind, great or small.

Just about the same moment Batty, breathing fire and flame, had found Frederick, and was pouring out the history of his grievances.

"Do you ask a man to your house, you fine gentleman, when you're not at home?" cried Batty. "Lord, I wouldn't invite a dog, unless I meant him to share my kennel. A miserable, empty place, with a couple of impudent maids—that's what you call giving your friends hospitality, eh? You invite a gentleman like that——"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Frederick; "I am not aware that I ever took so great a liberty as to invite you."

"Confound your politeness and your impudence!" said the other: and became so noisy that Frederick left the club, enduring without replying to the abuse of his companion, who, however, gradually calmed down as they emerged into the open air, where there was no one to hear what he said. He told his son-

in-law of the affront put upon him at The Elms—how the door had been shut in his face, though he had seen the ladies at the window—and demanded to be invited there, as a proof that no insult was intended. “I don’t care twopence for your paltry dinner,” he said. “Thank God, I can feed myself and all belonging to me, without being beholden to any man or woman either; but hang me if I’ll stand your disdainful ways. If you want to quarrel, say so; now that my poor girl’s gone, you and your stuck-up set are nothing to me. But a man’s honour’s his honour, however you take it. If there weren’t no affront intended, as you say, get the old lady to send me an invite, and I’ll look over it. I could not speak more fair.”

“What you ask me is quite impossible,” said Frederick. “Dine with me to-morrow if you will, either at my house, where you are, or somewhere else. I’ll arrange it, and I’ll give you a good dinner, a better dinner than my mother understands. But I can’t interfere with her arrangements. I live at home because it suits me, and there is room; but I never interfere with her guests. My mother has a will of her own. She leaves me my freedom, and I never interfere with her.

From this position Frederick would not recede. Batty, stung by the refusal, furious at himself for having asked, and at his son-in-law for not having granted, left him at last with a mind on flame, asking himself how he could be revenged on the ungrateful husband who, no doubt, had ill-treated his girl and made her miserable. He soothed and stimulated his feelings by extensive potations upon his drive back in his Hansom to the little house in Mayfair. He would not spend another night under that d——d roof, he would get his traps and go to his hotel, where he was known as a man that could pay his way; the old cat might stay if she liked, but as for him he would have no more of their d——d impertinence. But he'd go to the office next morning and expose the d——d scoundrel, d——n him if he wouldn't. Thus Batty blasphemed as his Hansom drove violently to the door of Frederick's house. He rushed in and mounted the stairs to the deserted-looking drawing-room, in which there were lights. "Get me my things together, old woman," he cried; "quick, I have not a moment to lose. They're all a pack of d——d impudent good-for-nothings. I'll see Frederick Eastwood at Jericho before I stay another night in his d——d miserable house!"

Aunty was standing dissolved in tears, with a coloured photograph in her hand, in a tawdry frame, a portrait of Mrs. Frederick, which had been done before she married, and in which her blue gown appeared to perfection, if nothing else. She was not alone; another individual, of whom Batty knew nothing, stood by in a corner, curtsying to him as he came in. Aunty held out the photograph to him, with the tears running down her cheeks.

“Look what I found in an old cupboard among the rubbish!” she cried; “the picture we was all so proud of. Oh, the lovely creature! and them as got her thinking nothing on her. And oh, Batty, there’s that to hear as neither you nor me knows nothing about. Look at her, the sweet darling! She’s been took from us, she’s been murdered! and neither you nor me knows nothing about it! Sit down, man, if you’re a man and loved your child. Sit down and listen to what this woman’s got to tell you. Sit, Batty, don’t be thinking of yourself. Sit down and hear.”

He was at once stupefied and excited by the drink he had swallowed, and lost in an intoxication of rage scarcely less confusing. The first words of the tale to which he was thus entreated to listen called up in

him a passion of vindictive grief and misery more potent still. He listened with muttered curses mingling with his sobs, looking at the poor faded picture, the simpering image of his daughter who was dead—of his daughter who was murdered—of Amanda, whom he had loved better than anything in the world, and for whom he could take a terrible revenge on the people whom he hated worse than anything in the world. He sat, and sobbed, and swore, and listened. No suspicion had ever crossed his mind before—now he felt that this was not suspicion, but certainty. That girl had done it—that girl who loved Frederick—and by whom vengeance dire and dreadful could be taken upon Frederick and Frederick's family, upon all who had slighted his child and slighted him. I cannot describe the mixture of real emotion and fictitious excitement, of passionate grief and injured self-love, of fierce desire for justice and wild vindictive personal rage which overwhelmed him. It was terrible, and it was horrible. Jane, frightened at herself, frightened at him, was not allowed to leave the place where he was ; he stayed at Frederick's house to mature his vengeance upon Frederick, and he seized upon his witness who was all-important to him, with a force entirely beyond her feeble powers of resistance. Jane, poor creature,

not meaning so much harm to others as good to herself, was there and then taken out of her own hands. The harm, too terrible to think of, too fatal to forecast, was no longer problematical. She had set the storm a-going, but only heaven knew where it would end.

CHAPTER XII.

THE THUNDERBOLT.

LONGUEVILLE HALL, the principal residence of Sir Alexis Longueville, Bart., is one of the first houses of its class in the south of England. It is not of the first magnitude, but it is of the first excellence. It has always been the home of wealth—nothing about it has ever fallen into decay. The façade is pure Italian, and has been ascribed to a very great name indeed in architecture; but in the east wing, which is the oldest part of the house, there are traces (as the “Handbook” to the county will tell you) of much older work. The kitchen is a great vaulted Gothic chamber, whispering recollections of Wolsey, and guests archiepiscopal at the least, and the building has been carefully toned up or down to these relics. You can see at a glance that nothing has ever been neglected or forsaken at Longueville Hall.

The Longuevilles had always been a very proud family, though Sir Alexis, by dint of being of the younger branch—not a younger son, but, what is worse, a younger nephew—had learned to veil his native haughtiness in a semblance of theoretical equality; but even he had all the pride of the Longuevilles, though he knew better than to exhibit it where there was no need of such vanities. And to all the Longuevilles their house had always been the first of houses, the one sacred shrine to which no evil was permitted to approach. They had worshipped it with a certain superstition, and the consequence was that few houses in such perfect preservation were to be found in England. Almost all that remained for Sir Alexis to do when he came into possession was the remodelling of the gardens, and the rearrangement of the picture gallery—not that either was in bad order, indeed, but that, as a connoisseur and amateur flower gardener of the first water, it was for him one of the first necessities of life to conform these sovereign luxuries to his own fancy. Sir Alexis was luxurious in everything. He was rich, and had few claims upon him beyond those of his own tastes, and accordingly he had spared nothing in the gratification of those tastes. The house accordingly was the pride of the county, the standard of grace and

of art for the whole district. "Ah, you should see Longueville," the rural squires said, when they were told of Chatsworth or of Trentham; and when a newly-married gentleman of the district remodelled his old rooms for his bride's arrival, furtive recollections of the reigning house were ever visible in his furniture and flower-beds. Simplicity itself came into fashion through the example of Sir Alexis; and though the magnificence was less easy to be copied, the attempt was made out with still more eager servility. Every new detail in the great house was described and dwelt upon with unfailing interest throughout the neighbourhood, and when it was known that Sir Alexis was about to introduce that crowning novelty, that final luxury, a young and beautiful wife, the interest rose to a climax. This was a particular in which few of the rural great people could copy, in which most of them had preceded, the baronet. But still in hall, and park, and parsonage throughout the country the new Lady Longueville was looked for with almost enthusiasm. People were honestly glad that the old house was not to die out. Whatever advances democratical feeling may have made, this pleasure in the continuance of a family is, I believe, universal in England. It gave an almost personal gratification to people who had no con-

nexion whatever with the Longuevilles — such a gratification as bystanders have in seeing an apparently failing cause or combatant pick up strength, and gain at the very end an unhopèd-for triumph.

There were all kinds of rejoicings on the estate itself, and it was under triumphal arches, with ringing of bells, and sound of music, with a body-guard of mounted tenantry, and shouts that rent the sky, that Innocent was conducted to her future home. I do not know if she understood the full meaning of such a demonstration, or took in in the smallest degree (I do not believe it) the elevating sense of local, almost national importance, the *quasi-sovereignty* which such a reception might convey. But her mind was full of a kind of wondering pleasure—the phantasmagoria in this case which glided before her dreamy eyes was pleasant and bright, and amusing and pretty; and she had one strong staff of reality to support her in her husband, her perfectly kind and always attentive companion, who took complete charge of her, told her what to do, cared for her in everything, and never scolded her; conditions which made up all the Elysium Innocent had ever dreamed of. Sir Alexis had happily hit upon the right key-note at the very beginning. He had

taken up, after careful thought, the position which Frederick had stumbled into by chance, and which had bound Innocent to him in absolute allegiance for so long. Sir Alexis, thinking it all carefully over, and determined to be successful in this last great venture of his life, had not been above taking a lesson, even from that attachment to Frederick, which was the only thing he resented, and the only thing he feared in his simple young wife; and the experiment had all the appearance of being triumphantly successful.

After the first bewilderment and agitation inseparable from the beginning of a life so strangely new and different from all her past, Innocent had settled down with sweet docility into all the novel habits of her changed existence. The magnificence that surrounded her pleased her. She took to it naturally. The great rooms, the larger lines of drapery, the size and space about her, supplied a want which she had vaguely felt during all her life at The Elms. The want of space was the first thing which had struck her on her arrival, and during all the interval she had been conscious of it. To be sure, the magnificent perfection of Longueville was very unlike the scanty poverty and bareness of the Palazzo Scaramucci; but yet this great house was more like

home to her than were the smaller crowded rooms, clothed from top to bottom, of her aunt's house. She had room to breathe. I think Sir Alexis was disappointed that she did not choose for herself one of the smaller rooms, to make of it her own special bower and the future domestic centre; but he was wise and very tolerant, and did not interfere. "All that will come in time," he said to himself. He did not even ask questions about what she liked or did not like, but skilfully watched and followed the unconscious leading of her inclinations. Few men would have had the patience to do this, as few men would have been able to gratify these inclinations as they showed themselves. But Sir Alexis was capable of both.

I cannot follow out the course of this curious idyll. I suppose it is within the bounds of possibility that a man of fifty might find himself able to play the impassioned part of the young lover in an idyll of the more usual kind, though I avow that to a woman approaching that period of life the possibility appears half-humbling, half-comical; but Sir Alexis did not attempt this particular *rôle*, which, indeed, would have been incomprehensible to Innocent. Their mutual position was of a different kind. In marrying a creature so unlike ordinary women—so

undeveloped, so simple in mind and thoughts—Sir Alexis had accepted all the responsibilities of the position. He showed his love for her rather in the calm way in which a father displays his sentiments than with the passion of a young husband. Her beauty delighted him, and the pride of possessing so rare a piece of Nature to crown his collections; and her simplicity—even her pensiveness and silent-ness had a charm for the man of the world, whom the world had often wearied, but who found a kind of renewal in the society of this soft companion, who accepted all he said with little response, but no contradiction, and who turned to him after a while as flowers turn to the sun. And it would be simple foolishness to say that Innocent loved Sir Alexis as women love their husbands; she was incapable of such a sentiment; but she had a gentle affection for him, made up of gratitude and the soft response to kindness which every gentle nature gives. She learned soon and without words the pleasant lesson that her comfort and happiness and well-being were dear to him beyond everything else, that he would neglect no indication of her wishes, no germ of inclination on her part. He took care of her whatever she did, wherever she went, he shaped all his acts and his ways to please her, or—which was just

as good—he implied her acquiescence in all he wished, and told her to do what she was glad and pleased to do in obedience to him. He made her drive, he made her ride, he took her out walking, he filled her life with gentle occupation. Sometimes she would write something for him at his dictation, or at his desire—sometimes she would play for him, pleased to think she pleased him, and with growing certainty day by day that everything she did pleased him, *because* she did it, a certainty which is more potent in attracting and confirming affection than perhaps any other secondary influence. And haply Sir Alexis himself not only endured patiently, but enjoyed this curious placid life, which was so strangely different from the ordinary honeymoon. His pride was involved as well as his affection. Many men dream (I believe) of training their wives into perfect accord, perfect harmony, or rather reflection of their own being; but few men have ever had such an opportunity. Innocent seemed the blank sheet on which he could write his name, the virgin wax which he could mould into any form he pleased. He did not put actual educational processes in operation, but he began to guide her towards the things that pleased him. He praised her music, and so persuaded her to cultivate that

faculty, which was perhaps the only one by which she could have reached a certain kind of excellence. He read to her, not inquiring much into her opinions, hoping for little beyond impression, yet placing a certain trust in that. He talked to her, and told her stories of people and places and things, of pictures which she had a natural love for, and books which she respected with a certain awe. His object was not only to ripen and mature the pretty Innocent he was fond of, but to produce out of this germ of being the Lady Longueville, who would be the mother of his children, and mistress of his house—when his work was done.

They spent some weeks thus together, pleasant and soft and free from care. Thus all February, with its winds and chills passed over them, and March began. They had not, however, quite completed the honeymoon, when a vague, indescribable shadow fell on this tranquil sweetness. The shadow fell, not on Innocent, who, however, once or twice vaguely fancied on looking at her husband that he might be “angry,” but on Sir Alexis alone, who sat long over the newspaper one particular morning, rose pallid as a ghost from reading it,—locked it carefully away in his desk, and telegraphed immediately after to his solicitor in town. His

countenance was changed when his young wife came into the room, and that was the first time that Innocent fancied he was angry,—but when she asked him, he took her in his arms with more passionate fervour than he had ever shown before.—“Angry, my darling,—can I ever be angry with you?” he cried, frightening her by his vehemence. The solicitor, Mr. Pennefather, a serious man, whom Innocent had scarcely seen before, came next day, and there were very long and solemn discussions between the two men, during which she was left alone, and felt somewhat desolate, poor child; but she was perfectly satisfied when she was told it was business, and asked no questions. When Mr. Pennefather went away, the shadows seemed to pass, and all was well again. The great woods about Longueville began to thrill with the new life of spring, and to open new buds to the genial sun. They seemed an emblem of their master, who was also clothing himself with a new existence, and delights, and hopes. The green slopes of the park surrounded the pair with miles and miles of a lovely solitude, stately in immemorial splendour, yet fresh as a village common. On the terrace, which occupied the front of the house, and upon which opened the many windows of the great drawing-room which Innocent loved, great baskets

of flowers were already placed. It had a southern exposure and was sheltered from the winds, and the gardeners were skilful and many. Sir Alexis took pleasure in placing these great bouquets of blossom in his young wife's favourite walk; and if any delicate plant succumbed to the frost, there were abundant means of replacing it. In the distance the broad lawn was marked out with deep golden lines of crocuses, and waving airy anemones, and every common flower that loves the spring; for he was wise enough not to despise the common children of Nature, the sweetest and most abundant riches of the season. After the momentary cloud which had passed over their sky, he was more tender than ever, more constantly watchful over her; and much of their time was spent on this terrace, where they would sometimes sit together, sometimes wander from one end to another, talking as they called it, which meant that Sir Alexis would talk and Innocent listen, looking up at him with docile, grateful eyes—or reading, when she was more attentive still, absorbed with the story; for it was always story, either poetry or prose. This was how they were occupied on one mild afternoon early in March. The sun slanted from the west upon the green terrace, one end of which lay in full light, while the other

was turned into a chill corner of shadow by the projection of the west wing. The husband and wife were walking slowly along the sunny side, now and then making a long pause by one of the flower baskets, gay with hyacinths and hardy azaleas. Sir Alexis, with the sunshine streaming upon the crisp curls of his hair, which was getting gray, read to her one of Tennyson's lighter and more youthful poems. I think it was "The Miller's Daughter." Sometimes, if he thought her attention was wandering, he would put out his hand and lay it lightly on her shoulder, holding the book from which he read in his other hand; and on these occasions Innocent turned to him with a smile, in which a faint dawning sense of amusement at his solicitude mingled with the natural dreamy sweetness. She was dressed in a gown made of white cashmere, somewhat more akin to the fashion than was her wont, yet falling in the soft clinging folds peculiar to the material, with a grace which modern fashion scarcely permits—and a little cloak of pale blue velvet, gray-blue, with a bloom upon it such as painters love, made after the fashion of the old cloak which had been her constant wrap in Pisa. It was Sir Alexis who had disinterred the ancient garment, and had learned the associations it had to her. He was a man who thought of

such trifles, and he had himself chosen with great trouble the colour of the material in which it was reproduced. Her hair had been allowed to fall down, as of old, on her shoulders. Nobody could be more strenuous on the point of appearance than was Sir Alexis on state occasions, but he liked to see his young wife look as childlike as when he saw her first. Thus she strayed along by his side, a child, yet with the mysterious maturity of wifehood in her eyes—a gentle vagrant in a world not half realized, yet one whose simple feet had trod through mysteries and wonders of life and death—the simplest of girls, yet a great lady-sovereign in a breadth of country as great as many a principality, and with power for good or evil over many a soul unborn. The evening sun slanted down upon her uncovered head, the princely house held all its windows open behind her, the afternoon bees, ready to fly home, sucked their last at the hyacinths with drowsy hum, and the soft grass felt warm under her feet. There was not a cloud upon the sky, save those which had already begun to perform the final ceremonial of the sunset in the west. How peaceful the scene! Tranquil happiness in the air, soft sunshine, nothing impassioned, lofty, ecstatic, but a gentle perfection of well-being. Every line of those trees, every blade of the growing

grass, seemed to bear its part in the peaceful fulness of enjoyment, which was almost too still and soft to be called by that name.

“The Miller’s Daughter!” Our poet was not the great poet we know when he wrote that soft and youthful pastoral. There was nothing in it too deep for Innocent. She listened, with her heart gently stirred, with a sense of all the peace surrounding her, and the grave calm love that cherished her, and her own ineffable safety from all evil—smiling when her husband laid his hand upon her shoulder. There have been scenes of more exalted, more profound emotion, but none more soft, more safe, more peaceful, safe, and sure than this afternoon scene at Longueville. The very afternoon was tranquil in its slumbrous peacefulness, like the girl’s heart.

They were disturbed by the sound of wheels ringing sharply upon the gravel of the avenue, and dispersing the pebbles on all sides, as if some one in hot haste was on his way to the hall. The avenue was invisible from the terrace; but this harsh sound offended Sir Alexis. It was no carriage, but some impertinent two-wheeled thing like a dog-cart which made this ado—he could tell as much by the sound. His brow puckered with impatience; he

stopped his reading. Something of the look which had made Innocent think he was "angry," a sharp anxiety, a sudden pallor, came over his face.

"It is some cockney party to see Longueville, no doubt," he said, in a voice which sounded harsh to Innocent. "But, thank heaven, they will be disappointed to day."

The sound ceased, but he could not resume his reading all at once.

"That is the nuisance of having a handsome house," he said; "all the fools in the country think they have a right to come and see it. I have no doubt these impertinent intruders will go away quite angry that we choose to keep our house to ourselves. I do not know what the world is coming to. But whom have we here?"

Two men were approaching, following the butler, who was a very solemn personage, looking like a bishop at the least, but who, this time, was pale and scared, with a curious look of warning and alarm. The men who followed at first only conveyed to the beholder the impression that they were "not gentlemen." As, however, they advanced closer, an indefinable air about them began to take effect upon Sir Alexis, as it seemed to have done upon his servant.

The paleness of his face increased till it grew ashen-grey:

“Had you not better go in, Innocent?” he said hoarsely, laying his hand once more on her shoulder; but his voice was strange, not like the gentle tone in which he usually gave her his instructions; and Innocent kept her place by him, falling a step behind him, but showing no other appearance of embarrassment or shyness. She was not looking at them, but saw vaguely that the new-comers were not interesting to her. She waited because her husband waited, to see what they wanted. It was an interruption—but interruptions did not affect Innocent as they do most people. “The Miller’s Daughter,” and the lingering warmth of the spring afternoon would wait.

“Two—gentlemen, Sir Alexis—to speak with you,” said the butler, standing aside with an air of fright. He did not go away when he announced them in this simple way, but stood still, like a man paralyzed, not seeming to know what he did.

Shabby men—not such men as had any right to penetrate there,—into that region of refinement and splendour. They kept very close to each other. One of them, the shabbiest of the two, kept so close on his companion’s track that their shadows fell into

one along the grass. The other cleared his throat, shifted from one foot to another, took out his handkerchief, and wiped his face. He was embarrassed and uncertain.

"Is there anything in which I can serve you, gentlemen?" said Sir Alexis, with a voice so strangely restrained by excitement that even Innocent looked up at him wondering, not recognizing the sound.

"I don't want to do nothing disagreeable," said the foremost, "or to make any unpleasantness as can be spared. It is an 'orrible business, make the best of it as you can. We won't give no trouble as we can help, Sir Alexis. She may go in her own carriage, and you may go along with her, if you please. But I can't disguise from you as my lady must come with us. I don't know how much you knows about it—and I don't doubt as one way or other she'll get off——"

"What is the meaning of this?" said Longueville. Oh God! how well he knew what it meant! He made a step forward in front of his wife by instinct; then stopped short in the confusion of impotence, knowing that he could do nothing, and that his only policy was to submit.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the man, moulding his hat in his hands with real embarrassment. "I

feels for you with all my heart. I have my warrant all in order. You shan't be deceived nohow—and anything as we can do to make the blow less 'eavy and spare ill-convenience, you may calculate upon. But I have to do my duty——”

“Of course, you must do your duty,” said Sir Alexis, pale, but nerving himself for the worst. “But, my good fellow, here is evidently some mistake. What——” he paused, with an effort, for his lips were parched——“what—do you mean?—whom—do you seek here?”

“If I must say it in so many words,” said the officer, “I have come for my Lady Longueville. Here's my warrant. It's all in the paper.—‘Dame Innocent, wife of Sir Alexis Longueville, Bart——’”

“For what? Good heavens!”

How vain it was to ask!—as if since even he saw these men, the certainty of it, the shame, the misery, the horrible possibilities which might follow, had not risen like a picture, pale against a lurid background of suffering, before his eyes.

“For the murder of Amanda Eastwood, at Sterborne, on the 21st of October last——”

For the first time Innocent was fully roused. She uttered a low cry—she turned to her husband with a wild look of wonder and appeal.

“You said it would all be made right — all right!” she said, clasping her helpless hands, appealing against her sudden misery to heaven and earth.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FIRST DESERTER.

THE next morning after this event, Ernest Molyneux, with a newspaper in his hand, jumped out of a Hansom at the door of The Elms, and rushed into the house. The door was open; a certain air of agitation and excitement was about the place, some trunks stood in the hall, corded and labelled as for a journey. He told Brownlow, who came out of the dining-room at the sound of his arrival, to send Miss Eastwood to him directly, and made his way into the drawing-room, which was empty. Empty, arranged with all its usual peaceful order and grace, full of sunshine, sweet with the flowers which looked in brightly through the round window-door of the conservatory,—with novels from Mudie's on the table, Mrs. Eastwood's workbasket, and Nelly's knitting. Nothing can excuse untidiness in an

English house—the housemaid must do her duty whether we live or die, or even if things happen to us which are worse than life or death. Molyneux was confounded by the tranquil comfort, the brightness and calm of this shrine of domestic life. It checked him in his eagerness and heat. The horrible news in the paper seemed to lose all appearance, all possibility of truth. He calmed down. He asked himself what he would have to say to Nelly, after demanding her presence in such hot haste if this rumour was not true. A little shame, a little compunction came into his mind. He had not come here to console, but to reproach. He had to wait for some time before she came, and in the meantime the absolute stillness of the house, the tranquillizing warmth and brightness of the sunshine, worked upon him with the most curious effect. He became more and more ashamed of himself, and I do not know what moral result might have been produced in the end had Nelly delayed her coming much longer, or had her own demeanour carried out the effect of this scene. But Nelly came in, with red eyes and pale cheeks, in the simplest of travelling dresses, with that look of mingled excitement and exhaustion which more than anything else betrays “something wrong” in the history of a family. She came in

eagerly, almost running to him, with that instinctive and unconscious appeal which is conveyed by visible expectation, and which it is so difficult to disappoint, her hands outstretched, her eyes ready to fill with tears. The sight of her emotion, however, had an effect upon Molyneux which totally counteracted the calm of the house. It restored him to his position of criticism and superiority. He took her hands, it is true, and even kissed her cheek, though with something of that indifference which comes with habit. But he made no demonstration of sympathy. He said hastily, "Nelly, I am come to you for information. Have you seen what is in the papers? Surely, surely, it cannot be true!"

The check and sudden revulsion which comes to all who expect too much came to Nelly. She withdrew her hands from him. Her tears, which were ready to fall, went back somehow. She retreated a little from his side; but her pride supported her. At that moment and for ever Nelly closed the doors of her heart against her lover. It is true indeed, as the reader will perceive, that she threw them open again, once, and once only, not knowing that her decision had been made, and believing there was still a place of repentance; but, certainly, though she was not aware of it, those doors closed now

with a crash of sound which rang in her ears and made her deaf to everything else. She thought for the moment, however, that the ringing in her ears meant only weariness and pain, and sat down, to keep herself from fainting, in her mother's chair.

"If you mean is it true that Innocent, poor Innocent, has done what they say,"—said Nelly, low and trembling; "but all the rest is true enough. They have put her in—— Oh me! Oh me! how can I say it? It is those dreadful people whom Frederick bound himself to, for a curse to us all."

"But," said Molyneux—he was more bewildered than I can say to find himself uncontradicted, to know that anything so incredible was really true.— "But those dreadful people, as you call them, could not do this without some cause, something to build upon. For God's sake tell me! How do they dare? Is there any foundation?"

"Mamma went down to inquire the very day," said Nelly dreamily, repeating the old story, "she lost no time. She came back saying it was sheer delusion, nothing more. There was no foundation. Every one was quite satisfied that Mrs. Frederick died of heart-disease. Nobody, except Innocent herself, ever dreamt of anything of the kind."

"But Innocent herself—what was it that she dreamt of? What was the delusion?"

"She had to give a sleeping draught, and she gave—too much," said Nelly simply. "She was frightened to death. She left the house instantly, and came home. Oh, how well I recollect that dreadful morning! She came in accusing herself, and Jane heard what she said. Ernest, could such evidence harm her? Is it possible? Her own wild idea, nothing more."

"I am bewildered by all this," said Molyneux. "You have known it ever since Mrs. Frederick's death, and I have been allowed to—— You have never breathed a syllable to me."

"Oh, how could I?" cried Nelly. "Think, to put it into words was like giving some sanction to it; and you were not fond of her as we were. It was on my lips a hundred times. But, Ernest, you were not fond of her."

"No, thank heaven!" he said, walking up and down the room. The chief feeling in his mind was anger, mingled with a certain satisfaction in the sense that he had a right to be angry; "I hope, at least, Longueville knew," he added after a pause, "I hope you think he, being fond of Innocent, had the right——"

“Ernest,” said Nelly piteously, moved by one of those last relentings of love which cannot, for very pity, consent to its own extinction, “surely you have some feeling for us in our great trouble. It was because poor Innocent told him, appealed to him, that they ever married at all. He was very, very kind, very good—to us all.”

“Apparently, then, everybody has been considered worthy of your confidence but myself,” said Molyneux; but, notwithstanding, the knowledge that Sir Alexis knew made him think better of the business. Longueville, he thought, was not such a fool as to have married a girl against whom there was real evidence of such a tremendous character. “It is a very good thing that you have Longueville to depend upon,” he said, after a pause. “Of course it is chiefly his business; of course, he has been making his arrangements to meet the danger; he will get the best counsel—the best——”

“Ernest,” said Nelly, rising from her seat. She put her hands together unconsciously, as she went up to him—“Ernest! We have often talked of what might be, if something really worth your while should offer; not mere troublesome law-business, but something that would really exercise your mind—something worthy of you. And, Ernest, would it

not be all the more great, the more noble if it was to save an innocent creature from destruction? You know her almost as well as we do," cried the girl, the big tears running down her pale cheeks. "You have seen her grow from almost a child. You know how simple she is, how innocent, like her name. Perhaps she was slow at first to see that we loved her. Perhaps we did not go the right way. But you have seen it all, Ernest; you have known her from the first—from a child. She never was anything but a child. And you are eloquent—you could bring any one through whose cause you took up. Oh, what a power it is—and when you can use it to save the innocent, Ernest! I do not say for my sake——"

She stood before him more eloquent in her tears than he, with all his cleverness, could ever have been, with one soft appealing hand on his arm, and the other raised in passionate entreaty. Her eyes were fixed upon him with a prayer as passionate—all Nelly's heart, all her soul, was in this appeal. It was for Innocent—to save her; it was for Ernest, to save him; it was for herself, poor Nelly, to change her despairing into life and hope. Never was face more full of emotion than the glowing, moving, tearful face, every line quivering, every feature inspired,

which she turned upon him. Her very look was a prayer intense and passionate. But opposite to this entreating face was one which lowered like the skies when everything is black with storm. Ernest shut himself as heaven itself seems to close sometimes upon the prayers of the despairing. He stood obdurate, unmoving, unmoved, looking at her with blank brows, answering with a hard abstinence from all emotion the imploring look, the impassioned words. Nelly saw how it was before she had ceased speaking; but she repulsed the chill of certainty from her heart, and prayed on with eyes and gestures, even when she felt herself to be praying against hope.

At last he threw off, not roughly but crossly, her hand from his arm, and, as he himself would have said, "put a stop to it."

"Nelly," he said, "are you mad? What do you mean? Longueville, you may be sure, has secured counsel already; I suppose he has not been taken by surprise as I have been? And supposing I could do it, would you have me begin my career under such unfavourable circumstances, on the spur of the moment, for the sake of mere family connexion? I have often heard that women carried their feeling for their own family a very long way; but to prefer this girl and her folly to the interests of your future

husband—to ask *me* to commit myself—— Are you mad, Nelly? Why, my interests are yours—my character is yours. You should beg me rather to keep out of it—you should keep out of it yourself for my sake. What is Innocent to us?—a silly creature, half idiot, an ungrateful little minx, fond of nobody but Frederick, and, I dare say, capable of striking a bold stroke for him, as she seems to say she has done. Don't look at me as if you would eat me. I don't say she has done it. I know nothing but what you have told me.”

Nelly shrank away from him to her mother's chair. A burning blush covered her face; her tears dried up as if by scorching heat. Her eyes flashed and shone; her whole aspect, her very figure seemed to change.

“I may ask at least one thing of you,” she said; “and that is to forget what I told you. I was very foolish to say so much. Women are prone to that, I suppose, as you say; but I may trust to your honour to forget it? not to repeat it to any one? I shall be very thankful if you will promise that.”

“Why, Nelly!” he cried, “I repeat what you have said to me! You don't take me for a scoundrel, I hope, because I don't act upon everything you say——”

She smiled faintly, and bowed her head, accepting the assurance ; and then between these two, who had loved each other, who were betrothed and bound to each other, there ensued a pause. She said nothing, she did not even look at him ; and he, looking at her, feeling somehow that greater things had happened even than those which appeared, cast about in his mind how to speak, and did not know what to say.

“Nelly,” he said at last, clearing his throat, “I see you are angry with me ; and, though I think you are rather unreasonable, I am very sorry to vex you. I would do as much as most men for the girl I love ; but I should be compromising your prospects, as well as my own, were I to plunge into this business without reflection, as you tell me. I am sure when you are cool and able to think, you will see the justice of what I say.”

Still Nelly made no answer. She could not trust herself to speak ; her heart beat too loudly, her breath came too fast. But to him it seemed obduracy, determined and conscious resistance, like his own.

“If this is how you take it, of course I can’t help myself,” he said ; “but you are very unjust—and unreasonable. A woman may stretch her demands

too far. There is much that I would be glad to do for your sake; but, even for your sake, it is best that I should employ my own judgment; and I cannot do what that judgment condemns——”

“No,” said Nelly, “No—I did not say for my sake; but if I did, it would not have mattered. No, you must use your own judgment. But will you excuse me, now,” she added, after a momentary pause, “if I say good-bye. We are going to—Sterrington directly, and I have still some things to do.”

“To Sterrington! To mix yourself up with Innocent, and trumpet your connexion with her to all the world!”

“To stand by one of mamma’s children in her trouble,” said Nelly, looking at him with tears shining in her eyes, and with a smile which increased his exasperation a hundredfold. “I am sorry you do not understand. Mamma’s place is with Innocent, and mine with mamma.”

“This is folly, Nelly,” he cried, “absolute folly. She has her husband to look after her. Have I no claims? and for my sake you ought not to go.”

She rose, holding out her hand to him, still with that pale smile upon her face. “Let us part friends,” she said. “This is not a time to discuss

any one's claims. What you cannot do for my sake, I will not do for yours. Good-bye."

"Is this final?" he cried, in rage and dismay.

"It would be best so," said Nelly gently.

But she did not know how he went away. She kept her composure, and appeared, so far as he could make out, as resolute as she was calm; but there was a dimness in Nelly's eyes and a ringing in her ears. The room seemed to swim about her, and his face, which flamed into sudden rage, then went out as it were, like an extinguished light. Gradually the darkness that closed over everything lightened again, and she found he had gone. She had not fainted nor lost consciousness, but a mist had overspread her soul and her thoughts, and all that was done and said. She sat still where he left her, quite silent, coming to herself. She forgot that she had things to do, and that it would soon be time for the train. She sat still, realizing what had happened, looking, as it were, at what she had done. She was not sorry but stunned, wondering how she came to do it—not grieved that she had done it. I don't know how long she sat thus; it seemed to her hours, but that, of course, was a mere impression. What roused her at last was the entrance of another man, as much

excited, as anxious, and curious as Ernest had been. He came to offer his services, to ask if he should go at once, and put himself at the disposal of Sir Alexis; and, in the second place—only in the second place—to ask what it meant. Nelly sat and listened to his eager questions, and then burst into sudden tears. She gave him no reason for them—why should she? There were reasons enough and to spare, without diving into her personal history, for any outburst of sorrow. John Vane put no questions, but he had met Ernest rushing in the opposite direction, and I think he divined that some reflection of a personal misery was in Nelly's paleness and agitation. But he asked her no questions, and he tried not to ask himself any, which was harder still.

When Mrs. Eastwood came into the room, which she did very soon after in her bonnet and cloak ready for the journey, Vane went up to her, holding out his hand.

"Forgive me," he said humbly, "for having done you a temporary wrong in my thoughts."

"How so, Mr. Vane?" said Mrs. Eastwood, with a faint smile, the first that had relieved the tension of her pale face since the terrible news came.

"I can understand now all about Innocent's

marriage," he said. "God forgive me for doubting her best friends. I thought you were like other women, thinking of a good match above everything."

"Are you so sure that other women think of a good match above everything?" said Mrs. Eastwood, once more with a smile, and then, as she had spared a moment from Innocent, compunction seized her. "What are we to do," she cried, "oh, what are we to do for my poor child?"

"I am going with you," said Vane, to whose own eyes (though he was a man not given to emotion) the moisture rose. Mrs. Eastwood sent Nelly away to put on her bonnet, knowing nothing of the interview which Nelly had gone through in the meantime—and entered into all the dismal story which Nelly had briefly unfolded to him. He made no reproaches as Ernest had done—that he had not been told at the time. He understood without explanations how unwilling they must have been to confide such a story to any one—even to Innocent's relation; and he listened with the deepest attention to Mrs. Eastwood's account of her own cursory visit to Sterborne, and the total absence of all suspicion at the time of Amanda's death. John Vane, an idle man, had read for the bar in a wrong way in his youth, not

pursuing the study, but yet retaining some fragments of knowledge—and it seemed to him that this was very important. He discussed the whole matter closely, giving, his companion thought, his whole attention to it; but yet—will the reader think less well of John Vane for it?—within a corner of his mind, or heart, if you like the word better, he was following Nelly, wondering why she took so long to put on her bonnet—whether she was crying, poor soul, over some lost illusion, some disappointed hope of her own, as well as over her cousin? He was almost glad to think that he alone was, as it were, in her confidence—that even her mother did not know that Molyneux had been there and had disappointed Nelly. He must have disappointed her (this train of thought went on like an undercurrent while he discussed, and that with an anxiety beyond words, the fate of Innocent)—he must have disappointed her, for he had left her. No true lover—no man worthy to be Nelly's husband—would have left her at such a moment. Had she been wise enough to see this? Would she be strong enough to perceive it hereafter? Mrs. Eastwood did not know—she made not the slightest allusion to Ernest. When Nelly had come down-stairs, and the cab had driven up to

the door which was to take them to the railway, she left detailed instructions with Brownlow as to the messages to be given to callers. "You can tell Mrs. Everard and Mr. Brotherton, if they call, that they will hear from me very soon," she said; "and the same to Mr. Molyneux; though, indeed, Nelly, it is negligent not to have let Ernest know sooner."

"I have let him know," said Nelly softly; and Vane thought she gave him a piteous, appealing look, as if to beg him not to say anything—a look which almost made him glad, though she was in trouble. And they were all in trouble. There are things that make one's heart rise even in the midst of lamentation and woe.

"That is well—that is always something spared," said Mrs. Eastwood, with a sigh; "and be careful of the young gentlemen, Brownlow. Ask Mr. Eastwood if he would like any change made in the dinner-hour while I am away, and see that Mr. Richard is called regularly at seven, and that he has his coffee. My poor Dick must go on working, whatever happens," she said, taking her place in the cab with a sigh.

And thus Innocent's friends, all who loved her, gathered round in her direst need. There was but one deserter, and he no friend of hers.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE EVIDENCE.

“BUT it is true—I killed Frederick’s wife,” said Innocent.

Her voice was tranquil as usual ; but her eyes were dilated and full of woe, like the eyes of a dumb creature hardly used. The scene had strangely changed for her. Instead of the sunny terrace at Longueville, the sunny garden at The Elms, the four grey walls of a prison-cell surrounded her. I will confess to the gentle reader that I never was in a prison, and I do not know how it looked ; but I never heard that there were special hardships in poor Innocent’s case, and I believe, indeed, that she was allowed many relaxations of the ordinary prison rules. She was seated on her little bed, Mrs. Eastwood was with her, her husband, and Mr. Pennefather, the solicitor, who had visited Sir Alexis at

Longueville, had come down to Sterrington with the eminent lawyer who was to defend poor Innocent, to have a personal interview with her. These two learned persons were subjecting the poor girl to a private examination, and straining all their faculties to get at the exact facts of the case.

"Oh, Innocent," said Mrs. Eastwood, "how often have I told you, dear, that you are mistaken. Do not give this gentleman a false idea. It is a delusion, a mere delusion——"

"Let her tell me her own story," said Mr. Serjeant Ryder, the lawyer. He was impatient of interference, and it seemed to him that a woman in tears, ready to interrupt his unfortunate client's story by weak denials of a guilt which the culprit confessed, was a most undesirable assistant at this interview. "Let her tell me her own story," he repeated, "there is nothing so important as that I should know the whole truth."

He had heard the story already, and had been led to believe the case simple enough. But an experimental lawyer, accustomed to all the subtilities of crime, does not easily believe in the most obvious story. "Mere delusion" might, indeed, tempt a fool to accuse himself, but it was not enough to explain a criminal prosecution, and all the solemnities

involved. I cannot describe the feelings with which the two bystanders kept silence, and listened to Innocent's story, which she repeated as she had so often repeated it. Sir Alexis did not say a word, and he put his hand on Mrs. Eastwood's arm, restraining her when she would have spoken. Innocent was left free to tell her own tale, which she did in her simplicity, giving all the details with absolute exactness and that curious matter-of-fact truth which was as characteristic of her as her visionary looks. She forgot nothing, she left out no circumstances. It was not until the second time of going over it that she even interposed that gentle profession of innocence, "I did not mean it," in the midst of her full confession of guilt.

"You did not mean it?"

"Oh," said Mrs. Eastwood, unable to keep silence, "how can you ask her such a question? She mean it! She did not even do it, though she thinks so—but mean it? Oh, Sir Alexis, this is too much."

"I must take my own way," said the lawyer. "I beg your pardon, but I cannot be interrupted. You did not mean what? To hurt the sick woman, or to put more than twenty drops in the glass? These, you perceive, are two different things. Pray let me

put my questions my own way. If I could be permitted to see Lady Longueville alone, it would be much better. Your feelings, I am sure, are perfectly natural, but if I could see her alone——”

Innocent put out her hand and caught at her aunt's dress with a low cry. “Oh, do not go away,” she cried, roused out of her usual calm. “It would be better to kill me than to leave me here alone. Oh, if you knew what it is to be alone! —all strange faces—nothing you ever saw before—and not even the window, as there used to be in Pisa, and Niccolo to come in before he went away. Oh, Niccolo, Niccolo!” cried the girl, her voice rising in a cry of such loneliness as went to the heart even of the men who questioned her. She calmed down next moment, and looked with a faint smile from one to another, from her aunt to her husband. “When it is day and you are here it is different; but at night it is all a mist and dark, and there seems no one but Niccolo in all the world, and Niccolo is not here.”

“Oh, Innocent, my darling,” said Mrs. Eastwood, “if they would but let me stay with you night and day——”

“Niccolo never stayed the night,” said Innocent, wandering off with a vague smile into her recol-

lections. "When he had put down the salad and said, 'Felicissima notte,' he went away. I could hear his steps all the way down the stairs; but I never was frightened. If he would but come in and say, 'Good-night,' I should be happier—for sometimes I think I am in Pisa now, only the room is smaller and there is no window," she said, looking up wistfully at the high window in the wall, which, with all her exertions, she could not reach. While she was thus gazing with her head turned away, the two lawyers exchanged significant glances. Mr. Serjeant Ryder looked at Sir Alexis with a faint elevation of his eyebrows, and shut his note-book with something between impatience and despair.

"I don't think," he said, "that I need trouble Lady Longueville any further to-day."

"Go and ask him what he thinks," said Mrs. Eastwood anxiously in the ear of Sir Alexis; but Longueville, too, shook his head. He saw well enough what Innocent's counsel thought; he had no desire to have his conclusion put into words. He himself could not banish from his mind a chill sense that Innocent had retrograded, that she had gone back ever so far from the mental condition to which she had reached when he read to her on the terrace at Longueville. A chill dread struck his

heart that this terrible event in her life would contradict all his hopes, would put a final end to all her possibilities of development, and reduce the simple unopened mind into mere idiocy. This horror of doubt being in his own mind, it may be supposed that he had no wish to have it confirmed and forced upon him by the voice of another. He shook his head, and threw himself down in the languor of despondency upon the wooden stool from which his counsel had risen. This was almost the most bitter moment he had yet gone through. She, for whom he had hoped so much, his crowning glory, his rare, unique blossom of humanity, would this be her conclusion? She would be acquitted—on the score of idiocy! It seemed the most hopeful, the only prospect before them.

Mrs. Eastwood happily did not give herself up to any such thoughts. Her office for the moment was to cheer Innocent, not to forecast what was coming. She sat down beside her on the bed, and told her of everything she could think of which would amuse her. She told her minutely how Nelly and herself had found lodgings opposite the prison. "You cannot see us, my darling; but we can see you," she said, with a show of cheerfulness, "at least we can see your window. One of us is always watching

you, Innocent. Is not that a little comfort to think of? If we cannot say good-night, so that you can hear, we say it in our hearts. Nelly sat half the night through watching, looking up at the window. What a pity it is so high! if it were not so high you could look across the road to us, and then you would feel as if you were at home. But when you say your prayers, dear, then you can make sure that we are with you; for I don't think there is one hour—not an hour, my darling—that Nelly and I are not praying for you.” Here for a moment Mrs. Eastwood broke down.

“Yes,” said Innocent, pleased, like a child. “I will do so too. Saying your prayers is a very good way; but I wish I could go down-stairs and across to the Spina as I used to do. I liked the chapel at the High Lodge; the Minster is too great. It is so strange,” she went on, with a smile, “I cannot get it out of my head that the Arno is down there, and the Spina Church just as it used to be. It is because I cannot look out of the window.”

“Yes, dear,” said Mrs. Eastwood caressingly; “but of course you know that the Spina is not there.”

“Oh, yes,” said Innocent; “and sometimes I think it must be Longueville and the great trees

stretching for miles—it is so strange not to see ; but I never think it is *home*. I do not feel that it could be home.”

“ Listen,” said Mrs. Eastwood in Longueville’s ear. “ She is as sensible as any one can be—full of imagination, poor darling ; but nothing else. God bless her, she was fond of Niccolo, and all that. And it has a very strange effect upon one, when one cannot see out of the window. She is as sensible as you or me.”

Longueville shook his head still, but took comfort. I think, however, that when he went away it was, on the whole, better for the poor prisoner ; for though the anxiety of the watch he kept upon her was disguised as far as he could do it, it still disturbed vaguely the absolute confidence which alone made Innocent happy. The doubt disturbed her—she could not have told why. It was only when she knew that she was entirely in possession of the sympathy of her surroundings, a knowledge which she attained by no intellectual process, but by something in the air, that Innocent lost her look of woe. Even the prison, the terrible loneliness of the night which she had to look forward to, the shock of this dreadful event which had taken place in her life, did not prevent her smile from regaining much of its simple

sweetness when her aunt talked to her alone, prattled to her—heaven help them!—of subjects much unlike those which one would expect to be discussed in a prison cell, of every gentle folly that occurred to her, and trifles far enough from her aching heart.

Mr. Ryder and Mr. Pennefather remained in Sterrington that night, and there was a long and solemn consultation held, after the prison was closed to Innocent's relations, in the little sitting-room opposite the jail where the Eastwoods were living. The Spring Assizes were approaching very closely, and Innocent's anxious defenders were divided upon one important subject—whether to seek delay, and gain time to collect all the evidence they could in her favour, including that of the doctor's who had left Sterborne after Amanda's death, and who was naturally a most important witness, or whether to allow the case to come on at the Assizes which was to be held in less than three weeks, and for which the quiet country town of Sterrington was already preparing with unusual flutter of anticipation, for an exciting and interesting trial, a very romance in real life, which would draw the eyes of the world upon it, was no common occurrence. Both the lawyers were anxious for delay, but the family more immediately

concerned were equally anxious that the trial might be got over as speedily as possible; partly, perhaps, because it was impossible for them to believe in any but a favourable issue as soon as the case was fully gone into, and partly from the more serious and substantial reason, that all felt the impossibility of Innocent bearing up against a lengthened interval of loneliness and suspense. "The child will die," Mrs. Eastwood said. Sir Alexis did not explain his fears, but they were of a still more miserable kind. Whether she lived or died, she would probably, he believed, have fallen into a blank idiocy even before these three terrible weeks were over, and if the three weeks were lengthened into three months there could be no hope for her whatever. "The trial must come on as soon as possible," he said, with an obstinacy which his confidential adviser, Mr. Pennefather, who flattered himself that he knew Sir Alexis to the very depths of his soul, could not understand, and no argument could move him from his position. Altogether the lawyers, I fear, were not satisfied with the unhappy "relations." It is true that relations are apt to be either over-confident or over-frightened, and to insist illogically upon the innocence of the accused when the thing to be done is to prove that innocence—a very different matter

from believing in it. But their obstinacy on the point of the trial, their indifference to the necessity of the doctor's presence, and the irrelevant interruptions made by the ladies, at last provoked Mr. Ryder, who was not famed for his temper. "These matters ought to be left entirely in our hands," he said peremptorily. "The doctor, so far as I can see at present, is the only witness on whom we could depend."

"But when I tell you," cried Mrs. Eastwood, "that I was there—that no one thought of such a thing—that it was a mere delusion——"

"What was a mere delusion?" said the lawyer sharply. "Did Lady Longueville give the draught or not? Is she under a delusion as to the actual opiate, or simply as to having killed the patient? If it is certain that she gave the draught, then the medical evidence is all important. We must discriminate between these two points. Is there any proof, except her confession, that she gave the draught at all?"

Mrs. Eastwood looked up quickly with a hard, sudden drawing of her breath. She looked round on the men, who were none of them in her confidence, and a sudden sense of fright sealed her lips. "They have no proof that I know of," she answered,

faltering, and, taking courage, bore the steady look which Mr. Ryder gave her without shrinking. As for Sir Alexis, his mind was absorbed in his own gloomy thoughts, and he paid no attention to this little episode. Vane, for his part, had not heard of the trial. Mrs. Eastwood withdrew soon after, trembling from head to foot, and went to the little room in which Nelly was sitting, gazing up at poor Innocent's high window with tender superstition, and threw herself upon her child's shoulder, sobbing and sick with misery. Frederick had taken the phial out of her desk, and had thrown it into the fire at the first rumour of doubt about Amanda's death. She had suffered him to do it, she could not tell why, and now how was she to explain? What was she to do? To say that he had done it, would be to involve him, already, unhappily, too much involved, for whose sake it would be the effort of the prosecution to prove the deed had been done. And it was easier to be silent about it altogether than to tell how so fatal a mistake had been made. The more Mrs. Eastwood thought of it, the more she felt how serious a mistake it was: and if she could have said truly that she herself had done it, I think she would have gone back at once and told her story. But to say that Frederick had interfered, that he had destroyed the

only tangible proof of poor Innocent's wild tale—he whom everybody thought badly of already, who was supposed the cause of all; who to every vulgar imagination, even to his own, supplied the motive necessary to make Innocent's guilt possible,—how could she mention his name; how involve him doubly, making him as it were an accomplice! With dismal confidence in chance, she said to herself that no one knew anything about the phial; that it would not be thought of unless she herself mentioned it. But after this she shrank from discussion of the subject. She avoided any encounter with the lawyers. She was to be, poor soul, one of the principal witnesses, and many a miserable, anxious prayer did the poor woman make, that God would direct the minds of her questioners away from this one point upon which she had gone astray. It seemed easier to her to trust to a miracle for deliverance than to confess the truth.

During the interval which followed, it would be impossible to describe the alternations of hope and of misery which swept over the unhappy family, who kept together in their little lodging opposite the prison. They were allowed to be with poor Innocent during the greater portion of the day, and then the ladies put on a semblance of ease, and even gaiety, which was far from real. But in the dreary

evenings they were apart from her—and the evenings of March are still long—the vicissitudes of feeling to which they were subject were like the changes of a fever. Sometimes it seemed so impossible to them that any one could for a moment believe so incredible an accusation: and again all the horrible accumulation of proof would gather round their souls. The love of the poor girl for her cousin—love which they had themselves believed, and of which they but dimly now had come to recognize the real character; her dislike, openly professed, for Amanda; her strange vigil by Amanda's side, brought about in so simply accidental a way, yet which might be made to bear the aspect of a deliberate plot; her sudden and unaccountable flight; her confession. When they recollected all these things horror would come over them, dismay, and almost despair.

These and a great many other particulars were in all the papers, reported and dwelt upon with all the avidity natural when the public mind has a story so interesting presented to it—a romance in real life. There had been the usual horrible preliminaries, into which it is not necessary for me to enter, before the warrant was produced for Innocent's arrest. Poor Amanda's last repose had been disturbed to furnish evidence, though, owing to the lapse of time, with

little or no result ; but the circumstantial evidence had seemed so strong to the magistrates before whom Innocent was first examined as to warrant her immediate committal. All that the public knew in her favour was mere supposition and hearsay, while the facts on the other side were very apparent. One dismal feature in the case, however, which appalled all who heard of it, was that while all Innocent's friends were called for the prosecution, it was by some cursed spite of fate only her enemies, with one exception, who could be called for her defence. Frederick was the only witness capable of saying anything about Amanda's death who would not be the personal enemy of the unhappy girl, and every one was aware under what difficulties, and with what prejudices against him, the man whom the public supposed the cause of the whole would appear before a British jury. In such cases women have the best of it. A woman who has been the cause of a deadly struggle between two men is not discredited, but rather gains a fictitious interest by it. But a man for whom two women have appeared to contend bears always a miserable aspect. Men despise him, and women hate him ; his evidence in favour of a culprit is worth nothing, for he is supposed to be bound in honour to perjure himself, if necessary, to shield the

creature who has risked her life for him. The public, as was natural, regarded Frederick with scorn and disgust. And yet, with the exception of Frederick, only Innocent's enemies, the father, the nurse, the women servants, all committed to proceed against her, could be called for her defence—a thought which might well have appalled the stoutest heart.

Jenny Eastwood had started at once in search of the doctor, whose evidence it was believed was of so much importance, and who had gone, not to the Colonies, as Frederick said, but to Transylvania, and other remote parts of Europe, with a scientific expedition. It was hoped that he might be brought back in time for the trial. And the anxious days went on—terrible days, but so full of eager consultation, of anxious reviewing of every circumstance, of the efforts made by all to keep each other up, and to support the poor girl herself, whose mind certainly seemed to weaken under the effects of her confinement, that they fled as if on wings. The unhappy family living at the prison gates, going to and fro constantly, identifying themselves with the poor young prisoner, yet probably destined to prove her guilt, became the object of much public compassion. The newspapers enlarged greatly on the attractive theme, and some graphic and eloquent journals went

out of their way to paint this striking picture of family devotion and suffering. But there were some facts which even the *Semaphore* itself was not aware of, which deepened every stroke of pain: Batty pursued the prosecution like a fiend, calling, as I have said, Innocent's dearest friends to convict her, to prove her foolish love, her wild expressions of dislike, her distracted avowal of guilt; and the case, thus complicated and embittered, would naturally fall to be tried by the youngest judge on the bench, the well-known and justly celebrated Mr. Justice Molyneux. Could there be any bitterer drop in that cup of tears?

CHAPTER XV.

THE TRIAL.

THE trial of Lady Longueville for the wilful murder of Amanda Eastwood, came on about the 2nd of April, after some unimportant business had been got over. The trial was one which was not only interesting in itself, but doubly attractive to the district in which the Eastwoods had their ancestral home, and where Miss Vane had set up so remarkable an establishment. Sterborne, like every other place, had very strong opinions about the semi-conventual life of the community which had possession of the High Lodge. Some wished the sisters and their strange lady abbess well, thinking that, whether wisely or not, they were women really attempting a great piece of work, while so many of us content ourselves with saying that work ought to be done. But a great many were virulent against

Miss Vane, especially among the lower classes, and these felt themselves almost flattered in their *amour propre* by the discovery that a niece or a relative of the mistress of the High Lodge was to be tried for her life. Many of them thought it served her right, many more that it was the natural result of nunneries, and that, on the whole, it was rather a good thing that light should thus be thrown on the doings habitual to them. Of others, and better-informed people, many were curious on behalf of the Eastwoods, and some on behalf of the Vanes. ‘Sterrington, the county town, was sufficiently near Sterborne to be affected by the strong feeling on the question which naturally existed there: and the county itself attended the Assizes almost in a body, half glad and half sorry that Innocent had never belonged to its “set.” Batty’s daughter, too, was very well known in the district; her beauty, her violent temper, and the match she had made having each and all of them attracted public attention to her. Thus the ordinary attractions of a trial, in which the romantic element was involved, and dark stories of love and mystery promised to be unfolded, were enhanced by everything that local interest could add to it. The court was thronged. There was as distinguished an audience as if the Queen

herself had come to Sterrington, or as if Titiens or Patti had been about to sing ; and the anxiety to get places was more eager than it would have been on either of these occasions, for it was a real tragedy, at which all the good people intended to assist, and which thrilled them with the liveliest emotions of sympathy, horror, and fear.

Thus the court was crowded from an early hour in the morning, when people went to take their places as for a spectacle ; every seat was filled, almost from the floor to the roof, the Town Hall was one throng and sea of faces, and it was with difficulty that the Judge himself made his way to the bench. Within the last week it had been expected that Mr. Justice Waterhouse, Molyneux's colleague, would try the case ; but the day before Sir Edward Waterhouse took ill, and there was no escape for the other, whose usually good-humoured countenance looked gloomy enough on this particular occasion. When Innocent appeared, who was the chief object of the popular curiosity, there was that thrill through the place which testified to the tension of excited nerves and highly-strained feelings. She came in very quietly, with a wondering, scared look in her eyes, but no other sentiment. She was not abashed, nor afraid to meet the gaze of so many.

Why should she shrink from their gaze? Innocent had been by many supposed to be shy, but she had never really been shy—she had not enough imagination for that painful feeling. Therefore she was not abashed nor shamefaced, though a faint additional colour came upon her colourless face. Her eyes had a look of fright because she did not know what was going to happen to her, but of the scene she saw, or the people who looked at her, Innocent was not afraid. She was in the same dress of clinging white cashmere which she had worn on the day when she was arrested, and had the little grey-blue cloak upon her shoulders. A very light little bonnet, more like a white veil arranged about her head, and throwing up her pathetic face against its white background—a bonnet which had been made by a fanciful milliner, to suit the strange beauty of the poor young bride—was on her head. There had been many consultations about this dress. Mrs. Eastwood had desired that her niece should wear black, as being less subject “to be remarked,” but Innocent had been unusually obstinate. She had carried her point, and accordingly made her appearance in a costume which was quite bridelike, and certain “to be remarked.” Nelly sat near the bar, as close to it as she could be permitted to place

herself, so that Innocent might see her, and feel the support of a friend at hand if her heart failed her. Sir Alexis was on the other side. She was surrounded at least by those who loved her best, and perhaps no young woman ever stood in such a terrible position who was less deeply impressed by it. She believed herself to be guilty, but her mind was not weighed down by the sense of guilt. She had a vague consciousness that something terrible might be done to her, she scarcely knew what; but she was not given to forecasting the future, and for the present moment perhaps Innocent was the least painfully excited of all the family. She could do nothing, she was in the hands of those people who surrounded her, billows of faces which indeed she did not know, but who looked on her, some with visible pity, some even with tears, few with an angry aspect. When the jury came in, to whom she had been told to look as the arbitrators of her fate, none of them appeared to Innocent to be angry; and from the presiding seat, where sat the man to whom everybody looked, and to whom the privilege of finding fault with everybody seemed allotted, there appeared to her a countenance she recognized, not awful, scarcely severe. And her husband and Nelly were close by her, to take care of, to speak for, to

prevent her from being scolded. She knew vaguely that there was something worse than scolding to be apprehended, but poor Innocent had never known anything worse, and therefore her fears were not lively on this point. To be sure she had already been imprisoned, which was worse than scolding; but the effect the prison had upon her was much more that of highly disagreeable lodgings than anything worse. She did not like them, she longed to go home; but still she had been brought there in preparation for this trial, and the very unpleasant room in which she had to live was one of the circumstances rather than any positive infliction in itself. She came into the court with these subdued feelings, and looked round her wistfully, with an appealing pitiful look, in which, however, there was neither terror nor overwhelming shame. Nelly felt the shame a great deal more deeply, and so did Miss Vane, who was trying hard to accept and subdue it as a mortification of the flesh, but who kept murmuring to herself in her corner, "A Vane! one of our family!" with humiliation unspeakable. Innocent did not feel the humiliation. She was scared, but not abashed, and as she got used to the faces, her eyes grew more and more piteous, wistful, appealing. When would they make up their minds,

all these strangers, and say to her what had to be said, and do to her what had to be done, and let her go home?

Before I begin this part of my story, I have to confess to the gentle reader that I was not there, and that I am very little learned in the mode of conducting such tragical inquiries. Everybody knows how confused are the narratives which those who have taken part in such a scene give to the historian. Sometimes one informant will lose all general sense of what was going on in a mere detail, or another burst forth into laments of mournful shame over a foolish answer he or she has given, instead of making the unfortunate narrator aware what that answer was. Under these disadvantages I have to set forth this scene, which is the most important in poor Innocent's history, and I trust the kind reader who knows better will forgive me when I go wrong.

There was some difficulty to start with in getting Innocent to utter the plea of "Not Guilty," a difficulty which had been foreseen, and which indeed could only be overcome by the exertions of all her friends, who had exacted a pledge from her that she should say the words, which were, they explained eagerly, a "matter of form," and profoundly true, at all events, so far as her intention went. All her

immediate supporters drew a long breath when this danger was safely surmounted. It was, indeed, more than a relief, for the pathetic way in which she replied to the question "What is your name?" by her ordinary simple answer, "I am Innocent," went to the hearts of the multitude, and produced one of those altogether unreasoning but most powerful moments of popular sympathy which transcend all argument. A distinct pause had to be made to permit the general emotion to subside before the first formal evidence could be heard, and vain and foolish hopes of foolish acquittal by acclamation swelled the breast of Nelly, at least, who, poor girl, with old Alice alone to support, her mother being a witness, sat searching for sympathy with her anxious eyes through all the eager crowd.

The first important witness called was aunty, who came into the witness-box in her deep mourning, subdued yet triumphant, feeling something of that fierce pleasure in having the life of another in her power, which seems to move humanity so strangely. She was by nature a kind soul. Under any other circumstances she would have cried over Innocent, and followed her fate with hysterical interest. But now she could not keep herself from feeling a certain elation—a certain satisfaction and superiority—at

having the girl's life, as it were, in her hands, and being able to crush the family who had been unfriendly to Amanda—the "other side." She came fortified with a large white handkerchief and a large double smelling-bottle, ruby and gold, which had been one of Amanda's properties, picked up during the unhappy visit to Frederick's house. Aunt, otherwise Miss Johnson, proved all the particulars of the death in her examination-in-chief. She related the unexpected arrival of Innocent—the sudden determination of Amanda to be attended by her husband's young cousin—and the preliminary scene in the afternoon, before dinner. The witness had no intention of saying anything untrue, but unconsciously she gave to her account of Innocent's behaviour in the sick-room an air of hostility and evil purpose.

"Mrs. Eastwood was in so little danger at this moment, that you could feel it right to confide her to the charge of a young girl?" said the counsel for the prosecution.

"Bless you, she was in no danger at all!" said aunt. "She was as she had been often and often before.

"And the young lady came, knowing she was ill, to help to nurse her?"

“Mrs. Frederick didn’t take it in that way ; she wanted no new nurses ; she made the young lady stay with her to keep her from Mr. Eastwood, as was a gentleman with taking ways. That is the truth, if I should die for it ! It was thought by his poor wife, and many more than her, as the prisoner was fonder of Mr. Frederick than ought to be between cousins——”

“I must appeal to the court,” said Mr. Serjeant Ryder, “that this is the introduction of an entirely new element not at all to the purpose.”

“If my learned brother will wait a little, he will see that it is very much to the purpose,” said the other. “I must really be allowed to examine my witnesses in my own way. I have no doubt he will afterwards make them as uncomfortable as possible in his cross-examination.—The deceased had, then, a strong reason for retaining the prisoner with her ?”

“As strong as a woman can have,” said aunty. “She knew as her husband was no better than making love to his cousin. I have seen it myself over and over. She kept knocking all the time of dinner for them to come up. And then they went into the garden. My poor dear was angry. I don’t know who wouldn’t have been ; lying there ill, not able to move, and knowing as your husband was

carrying on in the garden with a silly young girl."

"It must be acknowledged that the position was disagreeable. When the prisoner was finally summoned, did she show symptoms of displeasure? Did she resist the call?"

"She was not one as showed much of anything," said the witness. "She did something or said something as quieted poor 'Manda. I was sent away for quietness, as I told you, sir; and the prisoner got the book as I had been reading, and read her to sleep."

Then there followed a description of the next two hours, to which the court listened with rapt attention. Auntie was not eloquent; but she had a homely natural flow of words, and for this part at least of her story the veracity of an eye-witness. She described the silence which gradually fell over the room—how the patient dropped to sleep, not all at once, but after repeated dozes, as was her custom, during which time the reading went on; how at last all was still—how she, half dozing too in the passage outside, went softly, and, looking in at the door, saw Innocent also asleep, or feigning sleep, with her head on her breast, the book lying on her knee, and the little table, with all its medicine bottles,

illuminated by the lamp beside her. This silence lasted, so far as she could judge, for about an hour and a half, when she was suddenly aroused by a loud outburst of voices from the sick room. "I was not frightened—not to say more frightened than usual," said aunty. "She often did wake up like that, all in a flurry. I heard the prisoner's voice, so I know she was awake, and Mrs. Frederick a-crying and screaming for something. No, I wasn't frightened even then; that was her way; when she did not get what she wanted that very moment, she would scream and go into a passion. It was through never being crossed. The house was all still, everybody gone to bed but me; I heard the Minster clock strike, and then I could hear her calling for her drops. I couldn't make out nothing else. Then I heard a moving about and a rustling, and then all at once, all in a moment, everything was still. I can't say as I took fright even then, for now and again the passion would go off like that all in a moment. I waited and waited, listening; at first I thought as she had gone to sleep again. I said to myself now she's dropped off, she'll have a good sleep, and the worst of the night's over."

"Did anything occur then to excite your suspicions?" said the counsel, as the witness paused.

“Oh, sir, nothing as I could put into words,” cried aunty. “There was a creepy sort of feeling as went all over you, like as if it was a chill, cold and quiet, both at once. I felt it, but I didn’t say nothing till Mary the cook came slipping down-stairs in a fright. Then I took fright as well, for she was always subject to fainting fits, was poor ’Manda, and the doctor had warned us. I dashed into the room, and there was the poor darling lying back with her mouth open, and her big blue eyes wide and staring, and oh ! I’ll never forget that night as long as I live.”

The witness hid her face in her handkerchief. The feeling was perfectly spontaneous and natural, and it affected the audience, as natural feeling always does.

“Compose yourself,” said the counsel soothingly. “Take your time; no one wishes to hurry you. What was the demeanour of the prisoner during the sad event?”

“I hadn’t no time to think of her,” said aunty, sobbing. “She stood about, that’s all I know, while Mary called up the other servants, and we tried cold water, and everything I could think of. I can’t tell you either how long it was before I ran to my poor child, or how long it was before I saw that nothing

was of any good. It felt like hours and hours. The prisoner stood about in the way of the maids, and never did nothing to help us. I think she asked me what was the matter; but I can't swear to it. The only thing I can swear to was as I saw her stealing quietly out of the room when nobody was looking. I thought, perhaps, she was going to call some one. I never thought as she intended to run away."

"And that was the last you saw of her? She did not wait to see Mr. Eastwood? She did not make any explanation, or offer any help?"

"Not a thing, sir, not a word, as I'm a living woman. She went right off like a ghost. Mary, the cook, saw her a-standing at the door in the moonlight, and she says——"

"May I ask if Mary, the cook, is to appear as a witness?" asked Mr. Ryder.

"Certainly, a most important witness. We will therefore wait for Mary's own appearance to hear what she said. In the meantime, I suppose, you perceived the opiate had been administered?"

"That wasn't till some time after," said aunty, with a little confusion. "There was the glass on the bed as had rolled out of her poor dear hand, and a drop or two of black stuff on the coverlet."

"Was the opiate black?"

“Not as it ought to have been given,” said aunty ; “many and many’s the time I give it, so I ought to know. It didn’t ought to have coloured the water——”

“You did not attach so much importance to these circumstances at the time—for what reason ? The deceased, you have informed us, was not dangerously ill ?”

“It was along of them fainting fits,” said aunty. “She was subject to them—the doctors had always warned us as she might go off in one any day, if we didn’t take care. We had to be very careful not to cross her. As long as she was at home she was never crossed ; but when a lady’s married it’s different. I had been frightened for the faintings so long that I never thought of nothing else—that’s the truth. If I’d had my wits about me, I’d have seen in a minute ; but being as it was, with all them warnings against the faints, and knowing as she had been crossed badly, and in a temper just before——the other was never put into my head in a moment like ; though it would have been, if I’d had my wits about me,” she concluded, in a tone of defiance, facing the eager listeners round her. The wary prosecution perceived coming danger, and dismissed her with soothing compliments.

"You have given your evidence with great distinctness; that will do, Miss Johnson. For the present I will not trouble you any more."

Mr. Sergeant Ryder was peremptory in ordinary life, but he could be very suave and sweet to a witness. He began his cross-examination with the same compliments.

"You have given your evidence with so much distinctness," he said, "and discharged your onerous duty so well, that I am sure there are a few further particulars with which you can favour us.—May I ask, for instance, how your suspicions were first directed against the accused?"

This was an embarrassing question, with which the witness was scarcely prepared to cope; but she got through it by a vigorous exercise of mother wit, and told, not ineffectively, how Jane's story cleared up to her many difficulties which had dwelt in her mind in respect to Amanda's death, and how she felt at once that a flood of light had been poured upon that event, which, ever since it happened, she had been brooding over, feeling that there was something inexplicable in it.

"I saw it all as clear as daylight," she said; and as here again the feeling was natural, she carried the audience with her, as every practised eye could see.

"Still you felt no necessity at the time for any other explanation except the fainting fits to which the deceased was liable. How long had she been subject to these fainting fits?"

"From a child," said aunty. "When she was a baby she had to have everything she wanted, or she'd have cried herself into fits. So every doctor told us—it was not her fault, poor dear. It was something as affected her heart. She could not put up with things as other folks have got to put up with. She had very fine feelings, had poor Amanda," the witness said, once more hiding her face in her handkerchief. The feeling, however, was fictitious here, and consequently did not tell.

"But it is sometimes highly inconvenient to have very fine feelings," said Serjeant Ryder. "You have said that she did not approve of the friendship between her husband and his cousin. Was this the chief cause of the excitement which brought on those fainting fits?"

"Oh, bless you, sir, anything would do," cried the witness incautiously. "I have seen her fly out at myself for opening the door too quick or too slow, or for putting a thing down on a table, or for pinning my collar wrong. It didn't matter what it was!" Here aunty discovered her mistake, and added,

falteringly, "I mean since she was married. When a lady is married she is in the way of being put out more than a young girl at home in her father's house——"

"How is that, now—tell me—I should like some information on that subject," said the bland lawyer. "Is it because a lady who is married gets so much more of her own way? or less?"

"Lord, sir, what a question—less, of course. She was never put out, nor allowed to be put out, when she was at home with us; but when a girl goes into the world, and has to be troubled with servants, and bills, and all that—not to say with a husband as would be enough to try a saint——"

(Episodes of this kind are amusing and exhilarating, I suppose, to both the witnesses and the counsel, as well as to the audience, whose feelings are thus preserved from undue tension—but they are somewhat hard upon the persons principally concerned: Innocent's friends looked on with blank and rigid faces at this encounter of wits.)

"Are we to understand, then, that the deceased was cruelly tried by her husband?"

"I don't know what you mean by cruelly tried—between cruelty as you can go to law for, and the way a man ought to behave as is fond of his wife,

there's a deal of difference," said the witness, feeling that she had the best of it. "All I have got to say against him is, that he was aggravating in his ways—most gentlemen is."

At this there was a laugh—notwithstanding the pale, piteous face of Innocent at the bar—notwithstanding the tremendous issues involved to a creature so young and so simple—and notwithstanding all the blank faces, almost awful in their indignation, of her friends, the court and the jury relieved their feelings by momentary laughter. Mr. Justice Molyneux kindly allowed his features to relax; even in the midst of a tragedy it is well to have a little buffoonery to lighten the strain.—The cross-examination went on, and Serjeant Ryder elicited many details of the life of Frederick and Amanda, which proved conclusively that no suppositious Rosamond was necessary to awaken her jealousy, and that indeed jealousy itself, or any such intense feeling, was not needed to rouse the excitement which was followed by those dangerous faints. A large proportion of the audience present had some knowledge beforehand of Amanda Batty's temper, so that the revelation was very complete; and it was a highly-interesting revelation, and gratified the curious. Every popular assembly is greedy of such details of

those exceptional human lives which are separated by misfortune or crime from the decorum of ordinary privacy, and delivered over to the gaze of the world. But though it was thus interesting as a revelation, it did not advance the cause of the prisoner at the bar, whose conduct in that mysterious moment when she was with the sick woman was neither explained nor affected by any of the details of Amanda's previous life. Much less interesting to the general mind were Serjeant Ryder's attempts to elicit distinct information from the witness as to the time which had elapsed between Amanda's last outburst of passion and the moment when aunty rushed into the room. "It felt like hours," she said; and she thought, but could not swear, that the hour which she heard strike while Amanda was talking must have been eleven, or perhaps the chimes for the half-hour after ten. This discussion, however, wearied the public, which had been allowed to taste more exciting fare.

After Miss Johnson's examination terminated, the maids were called to confirm her evidence, one of whom gave a picturesque account of the sudden appearance of Innocent at the open door in a flood of moonlight while she was looking out for the doctor. She was herself standing in the deep shadow on the other side, looking down the lane by

which the doctor must come. She described her own fright and wonder as the noiseless figure paused, looked round, and then glided along through the moonlight, until the next bank of shadow swallowed it up. She thought it was a ghost, and could not scream for very terror, and it was not until she knew that the young lady had disappeared that she identified the noiseless, gliding figure. The maids both thought Innocent's disappearance thus very odd, but they both confessed that they had given no importance to it at the time. Nor were either of these witnesses clear about the time. One was of opinion with aunty, that it was eleven o'clock which struck; while the other, who had not heard the clock, concluded the hour to be later. These were the chief witnesses to the event itself; for neither Batty nor Frederick were called. The former had held himself ready up to the last moment, but his vindictive impulse was so visible and so tremendous that the gentleman who held his brief had almost thrown it up after an interview with him, and had insisted upon excluding him from the witness-box.

Mrs. Eastwood was then called. This poor lady had been more unhappy than I can tell ever since she was aware that her testimony would be called for against poor Innocent. "What shall I say?" she

had asked with clasped hands and streaming eyes of Innocent's counsel, from whom first she learnt the real gravity of her position.

"Tell the truth, ma'am," that functionary had said sharply; for he was prepossessed against the aunt, who had, he thought, endeavoured to keep Innocent from speaking freely, and who had, no doubt, forced the poor girl into a marriage which destroyed what little mind she had. Poor Mrs. Eastwood tried to dry her tears and smother her indignation. And now the dreadful moment had come when she must tell that truth in all its naked bareness, without the explanations which she knew changed its character so completely. Her appearance was, for the public at least, the most exciting event of the day.

"You remember the morning of the 21st of October?" said the counsel for the prosecution.

"Oh, indeed, alas! I do," said the poor woman, the tears coming to her eyes. This injudicious warmth of assent was indicated to her as something wrong by the sharp cough of Mr. Serjeant Ryder, who, however, did not look at her; but Sir Alexis did, and Nelly, who clasped her hands and fixed an entreating glance on her mother, full of unutterable things. These warnings did, I think, less good than

harm, for they confused the unfortunate witness beyond description.

"Something remarkable, then, happened on that morning? The prisoner was absent from home, so far as I understand, on the day before?"

"She was on a visit at her cousin's, near Sterborne," said Mrs. Eastwood, "or at least so I thought."

"I see from the depositions," continued the counsel, "that the prisoner arrived suddenly at your house on the morning of the 21st. Will you be good enough to inform the court of the circumstances attending her return home?"

Mrs. Eastwood paused; she gave an anxious look round, to her daughter, to Sir Alexis, finally to the familiar countenance of the judge, who seemed to look at her with that twinkle in his eye of incipient sarcasm and amusement which she had encountered before. She met, too, from a distant corner the frowning, peremptory look of Frederick, who, being far off, raised a finger to her in warning—warning of what? She drew a long breath of reluctance and fear.

"I hope I need not tell a lady of your education," said the counsel peremptorily, "that hesitation can only harm the unfortunate prisoner. No prevari-

cation will help her. Everybody must feel for your very painful position ; but you are pledged, I must remind you, to conceal nothing, to inform the court of the truth. The prisoner came home suddenly on the morning of Sunday, the 21st of October. You did not expect her, believing her to be safe with her relation ?”

“I did not expect her,” said Mrs. Eastwood, faltering ; “she was to have stayed for some weeks ; still, as she was a little peculiar in her ways of acting, and very fond of home, and frightened of strangers, I should not have been surprised at any time——”

“You were surprised, however, on this particular morning ? Come, madam, the court is waiting. I understand you were not up when the prisoner burst suddenly into your room ?”

“She did not burst into my room at all,” said Mrs. Eastwood with indignation. “When I opened my eyes, roused by the sound of the door opening, I saw her by my side.”

“This was at a very early hour in the morning, before the other members of the household were up ?”

“It was about seven o’clock. The housemaid had let my poor child in as soon as she went down-stairs. She came to me naturally——”

“And when you woke under these unusual circumstances, and saw her by your bedside, what did the prisoner say?”

Again Mrs. Eastwood paused. She threw once more a bewildered look round the court. Then, recovering herself, she turned with the dignity of sorrow to the judge himself. “My lord,” she said firmly, “I don’t know what to do. The words I have to repeat will shock and startle every one who hears them; they will convey a false impression—they will create a prejudice——”

“The witness has no power of choice in the matter,” said the judge. “It is for the jury to decide what is true and what is false. The facts are what we must exact from you.”

Mrs. Eastwood grew very pale, so pale that all the women in the court believed she was going to faint, and the greater part of them grew sick with sympathy. “Then,” she said, in a very low voice, which, however, was heard everywhere, so great was the silence, “if I must tell it, this was what she said: ‘I have killed Frederick’s wife.’”

A long-drawn, sobbing breath of spent excitement, so universal as to reach to a subdued but distinct sound, came from the crowd. The witness stood for a moment leaning upon the front of the box, seeing

nothing but a mist of white faces—her brain whirling, her mind confused, with the shock. It did not occur to her—how should it?—that her reluctance, her paleness, her misery, were all so many additions to the force of her testimony. What more terrible witness could have appeared against Innocent than one out of whom this terrible testimony had to be dragged as from the bottom of her heart?

Some few moments elapsed before she knew very well what she was saying after this. She replied mechanically to the questions put to her, but she did not wake up to a full sense of what she was doing till she found herself narrating her visit to Sterborne on the next day. Then as she recovered her senses gradually, and began to discriminate once more out of the sea of faces those which interested herself most deeply, she awoke to the importance of all she was saying. She threw herself into this easier narrative. She remembered everything—her confusion and bewilderment passed away. It is so much easier to recollect, to explain, to record fully, events which are not against you, which are rather in your favour! Her account of all she saw and heard was so clear that it did much to neutralize the damning effect of her former testimony. Yet what could neutralize such a confession—"I

have killed Frederick's wife"? Why should the girl say such a thing, was asked on every side, if it was not true?

Jane, the housemaid—the cause of the trial—the traitor who had betrayed Innocent, came next to corroborate Mrs. Eastwood's testimony; but with so very different an intention! and Jane produced a little reaction in Innocent's favour by her evident desire to exaggerate, and anxiety to improve upon her former evidence. The lawyers fought over her for some time, and Mr. Serjeant Ryder managed to elicit several facts very detrimental to Jane's private character, although noways affecting her story, for when she was done that story remained plain enough.

"I have killed Frederick's wife!" These words were simple enough to remain in any one's memory, and terrible enough to require no aggravation. "She was a-kneeling by the bedside," said Jane, "holding her aunt by the arm. Neither on 'em saw me. She had something clasped tight in her hand——"

"Something in her hand? What was that?" the counsel for the prosecution demanded eagerly.

"I don't know what it was," said Jane. "No, I didn't name it before. I didn't think as it could

be of any importance. I saw as she had her hand clasped tight when I let her in ; but I couldn't see what it was——”

Mrs. Eastwood was recalled, and desired to explain this previously unnoted circumstance. She came back into the witness-box very pale, knowing by instinct what was coming. And bit by bit the damning parts were dragged from her. Faltering and pale, and reluctant, she described the little phial which Innocent herself had held out to her, to prove her wild story, and admitted that she had put it away, feeling it to be of importance. Afterwards, when her drawers were put in order, some one, “by accident,” had thrown it away. It had been done against her will. She had been much distressed—but it was by accident. To this story she clung with a kind of blank despair. All that she knew when she tottered out of the box was that she had not committed Frederick, or involved him in the matter. But it would be impossible to exaggerate the fatal effect of this confused and faltering story. For the first time the audience and the jury began to believe in Innocent's guilt.

There was a momentary instinctive pause after this momentous piece of evidence, and then the doctors were called who had examined poor Amanda's

remains. Into the terrible details of such an examination I need not enter. They had been able to add nothing to the elucidation of the mystery ; time had extinguished all trace of the poison, if poison there was. The only medical witness whose evidence was of any importance was young Mr. Sweteson, of Sterborne, who had been the assistant partner of the doctor whom Jenny Eastwood was now pursuing across Europe—and had once or twice visited Mrs. Frederick Eastwood. He was aware that she had suffered from a disease of the heart, which gave his former principal much anxiety. For his own part, the young man said, with the confidence of youth, he had not shared that alarm. This young doctor had no prejudice against Innocent ; he was, on the contrary, touched by her pathetic history. But he was on “the other side.” Though the witnesses at such a trial are called in the interest of truth only, and though humanity, justice, and natural feeling all urge upon them the necessity of bearing their testimony without bias, it is, I think, certain that every man summoned for the prosecution has a natural tendency to make the worst, and every man summoned for the defence a disposition to make the best, of the case. The present witness yielded quite unconsciously to this natural impulse.

He did not agree, he said (not informing the court how small were his opportunities of forming an opinion) with his former colleague. He believed Mrs. Frederick's Eastwood's complaint to be chiefly fanciful—the vapours of a foolish and high-tempered woman—dangerous enough to the comfort of her family, if you liked, but not dangerous to her, unless indeed she had broken a blood-vessel in one of her fits of passion, he added, somewhat contemptuously, or done herself bodily harm in some other way. Serjeant Ryder examined this witness closely as to the time necessary for the operation of an over-dose of opium, a question in which the court in general did not show itself greatly interested. The day had been warm, the court was very full, the interest of the great audience waned as the drowsy afternoon drooped towards evening; and it became apparent that no decision could be arrived at. The cross-examination of the doctor delayed the proceedings in a way which the audience thought tiresome, and which puzzled the honest jury, who did not see what was meant by it. The same feeling of weariness which had come upon the audience in general, and which was evinced by all those restless movements, coughs, and flutterings of going and coming, which prove to every public speaker when interest begins to fail,

had come, I suppose, upon Innocent too, though she had not followed the proceedings with any intellectual attention to speak of. She was roused, however—I cannot tell how—by all that had occurred. What aunty had said of her, and what the maids had said of her, had penetrated vaguely, taking some time to do so, into her torpid brain. And quite suddenly, while the young doctor and the counsel for the defence were still carrying on their duel on the scientific question, the whole assembly was suddenly thrilled, electrified, galvanized back again into interest. The people behind stood up, those in front bent forward, the official persons roused themselves in a sudden flutter, the usher of the court rushed to the rescue, the counsel started to their feet in dismay, the very judge on the bench began to telegraph wildly. The cause of this commotion was that Innocent herself had spoken. She was called to on all hands, as if the soft girlish voice could revolutionize the State. “Silence!” “Prisoner at the bar, you cannot be allowed to speak.” “You must be silent, Lady Longueville.” “Innocent, hush! hush! you must not speak!”—all these addresses were made to her loud and low, in every accent of authority, persuasion, and tenderness. Innocent took no notice. She went on—her clear,

youthful voice sounding through theirs as the song of a bird sounds through the clang of an explosion. She paid no attention to the looks any more than the words addressed to her. Simple as she was, I suppose the thrill of sudden interest about her—the immediate turning of every eye upon her—stimulated and encouraged her mind. She put out her hand, and gently pushed away the woman from the prison who attended her, and whose zeal to stop her was vehement. She said what she had to say through all the cries and remonstrances addressed to her. Whosoever does so singly and steadily is sure, I suppose, of a hearing at the end.

“You have asked them things they do not know,” she said; “why do not you ask me? I know more. It was I that was with her. I will tell you if you will listen to me. Please tell them to be still, please! for what I want is to save you trouble. No, please go away! I will go with you when I have told them. (This was to the prison matron, who had again clutched at her.) It is quite true, except that I never wanted to be with her, to be in the room at all. When I went up to her without Frederick she was very angry and scolded. I said to her, ‘Do not be angry, it does not hurt any one so much as you. They say it will kill you, if you do

not stop; and it cannot kill any one else.' Then she was quiet, and I read to her; and then she fell asleep, and I suppose I fell asleep too. Mr. Molyneux, will you tell them to be quiet, please! I woke when she shook me, holding my arm. I tried to drop the drops for her as she told me. I tried twice, and emptied it out, for I could not. Then I went again close to the bed to try if I could do it—(Oh, silence, please! silence, as you say.) She caught hold of my arm again. She shook me. Almost all the bottle went into the glass. She took it out of my hand and drank it. That is how it was. Yes, I will be silent now, if you wish it. I will go away if you wish it. That is how it was."

The cries all died into silence as Innocent's voice ended. Her unlawful interposition had woke the hubbub, and it ceased when she ceased. Not half the audience could possibly have heard, but that half was in wild excitement, while the rest who had not, struggled with equally wild determination to get better places, or to ask from those who had heard it what she had said. An indescribable scene of confusion followed. The afternoon air was stifling and heavy, the long day was at an end, a thundercloud had come over the sun, which was near its setting, and darkened one side of the court-house, while

the light came in pale and weird on the other, pouring in a gleam of illumination from the pallid sky out of which the storm was about to break. This gleam fell full upon Innocent's pale face, still tremulous with the excitement, if excitement it could be called, of her self-revelation, and upon that of Nelly, who stood up unawares in her agitation near her, and whose likeness to her cousin—invisible in happier moments—came out now with the most curious force. After that one amazed, affrighted pause, which was not unlike the pause before the storm outside, renewed cries of "Silence!" and "Clear the court!" were heard. The whole scene was like the brewing of a popular tumult.

"Remove the prisoner,—the court will adjourn till to-morrow," said the powerful voice of the judge, and the papers added that he made an indignant remonstrance as to the failure of the officials in keeping order, and the extraordinary breach of decorum which they had just witnessed. But if such remarks were made, no one heard them. The court broke up. Mr. Justice Molyneux, with a soleran face, went to his solemn lodging, devoting Innocent in his heart to all the infernal gods, and groaning over the unhappy destiny which had brought her case into his hands,—while the streets

about suddenly filled with a buzzing crowd, all the inns swarming with groups eager for the discussion of the case,—and their dinner. Torrents of rain, pouring down out of the black skies, soon swept from the streets all the eager clusters of people who discussed, out of doors, the one only subject of the day. Carriages stood under shelter through the storm, or lingered in the courtyards of the hotels in the High Street, till the worst of the thunder was over—but going or coming on the ways, there was nothing talked of, nor thought of, but Innocent. Was she innocent?—was she guilty? Was it accident, a mistake, the misadventure of a frightened child,—or was it the crime of a wildly passionate woman to secure to herself the man she loved? In all Sterrington there was nothing talked of but the trial. The entire population fought over it, taking different sides, and waiting with an excitement which had something pleasurable in it for the morrow which should decide.

How the Eastwoods and the Vanes waited for that morrow, crowding together in the little sitting-room opposite the prison, one or another of the women sitting constantly at the window watching with eyes full of tears the other high window opposite, with messengers coming and going, from the

lawyers,—from the railway and telegraph office, to see if there was any news from Jenny—I cannot venture to record. But to tell how Innocent spent the night is easy. She slept,—such sleep as comes to the beloved of heaven,—and woke in the morning with a smile upon her lips, thinking she was in the little church of the Spina, and saying “Our Father” before she woke.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SECOND DAY.

NEXT day the Town Hall was more crowded than ever. The sleep of the town, I might say of the county also, had been uneasy and broken. The place was torn asunder by faction, as it never before had been known to be. The Longuevillists were the strongest party; the Battyists, the most virulent. The one insisted upon poor Innocent's youth, beauty, strange fortunes, and pitiful, appealing looks, which they said were enough to melt the heart of a stone. The other cried out indignantly that had she been a poor girl, and not Lady Longueville, all this pity would have been spared, that nobody would have cared what happened to her, that she would have been left to her fate. The first were ready to forgive her love for Frederick, which everybody on both sides took for granted,

partly from the evidence, partly from those unspoken unconscious currents of rumour which come on every wind; and indeed many of Innocent's partisans held in their secret heart that it was quite possible she might have done it, but forgave her for the sake of her sweet face. Everybody accordingly rushed to the scene of action almost by daylight next morning. There were people who had been sitting there for hours before the judge made his appearance, to secure a seat. Miss Vane, who had gained a victory over herself during the course of the previous day, who had accepted the mortification as for her good, and decided to her satisfaction that poor Innocent's terrible misfortune was "a judgment" on her own pride, took heart of grace to accompany Nelly to her place near the bar, thus declaring openly that she too "stood by" her cousin. Nelly, who had grown very pale and hollow-eyed, for whom this trial had involved more than appeared, whose eyes, when she could spare them from Innocent, cast furtive glances through the crowd, wondering if it was possible that any one who had ever said he loved her could keep away from her now, was very glad of Miss Vane's support. I doubt, however, whether Innocent was so much as conscious of it. She had fallen into a passive

state, and stood at the bar with the early morning sunshine falling upon her girlish, pallid countenance, like an image of silent Patience, leaning upon the rail against which she stood, declining to take the seat they offered her. The weary strain was becoming too much for the girl's immature and delicate frame. She did not look at either judge or jury that day, but fixed her eyes upon a bit of blue sky which appeared through a window, and stood unconscious of anything else, gazing into that—longing to be out of doors, out of this close, crowded place, out of the surrounding walls, the throng of people, and the solitude which alternated with that publicity. “When do you think it will be over? When do you think they will let me go?” she said, in the voice which had grown more plaintive and child-like than ever, to the woman who stood by her.

“Hush, my lady! you mustn't speak to-day, or you'll get us all into trouble,” the woman replied. Yet Innocent repeated the question at intervals through the weary day. How bright it was, that gleam of sky! how pleasant it would be to be out, to be in the sunshine, among the flowers at Longueville, or sweeter still, in the Lady's Walk, with the history-book, and the primroses making all the grass

golden. These were the thoughts that went through her mind as she stood through the second weary day, grown too weary to attend, thinking only of the primroses, while she was being tried for her life.

The case for the prosecution had not been closed. The remaining evidence was trifling in substance, but horribly important in scope. It was chiefly made up of bits of conversation in which Innocent had expressed her love for Frederick—and her dislike of Frederick's wife. The former suppositious sentiment was very easy to prove, and the poor girl had never hesitated to express the latter feeling. One of the witnesses was a Sister from the High Lodge, who gave her evidence very reluctantly, but with almost as damning an effect as that of Mrs. Eastwood on the previous day, for Innocent had unfolded to this lady her conviction that such people should not live. On the close of her evidence the counsel for the prosecution spoke. He drew a touching picture of the poor young wife deserted by a fickle husband, hearing his steps below as he walked and talked with another, yet subduing her painful feeling, receiving that other with kindness, and with touching confidence admitting her to her sick-room. Then he pictured the course of thought

which might have arisen in the mind of a girl not wholly bad, yet distracted by a lawless love, and with the power in her hands of sweeping her rival from the face of the earth probably without suspicion or discovery. What so easy? had not she the means in her hand? He represented her as stung and roused by the reproaches which probably the young wife on suddenly awaking might address to her—and fired by sudden resentment rushing to “the fatal draught” which was before her. He commented upon her wild flight, her confession, the remorse which had evidently seized her, the terror which it was evident her friends had shared. He pointed out the strange and lurid light which the destruction of the phial, an incident unknown to the prosecution before yesterday—threw upon the whole question. When he ended the assembly had all decided against Innocent in their hearts—the jury-men pale, and almost stupefied by the thought, looked at her, wondering how they could find a Lady Longueville, a beautiful young woman, guilty, and trying to steel their hearts to that terrible duty. Half the women in the place (and there were a great many) were weeping. Good heavens! was it proved, then? was she guilty, that child? The hopes of her friends fell. Nelly sank back in her seat, cover-

ing her white face with her trembling hands. Sir Alexis continued to stand up with his arms folded on his breast, and a face like yellow marble, or old ivory, so ghastly did it look, every sign of youth gone out of it—steeling himself to bear whatever was to come.

The evidence for the defence seemed at the first glance very insignificant. It was chiefly directed to one point. The first witnesses called were two railway officials, who proved that the up-train passed through Sterborne at 12.45 every night, that it was seldom more than ten minutes late, being an express train to town with few stoppages, and that on the night of the 20th October it had left Sterborne station at 12.50 exactly. The only other witness of any importance produced was a London physician of eminence, who proved that no opiate, even though administered in a very large quantity, could by any possibility produce death within the time indicated by the evidence. The sleep which preceded death would no doubt have set in (he said), but that was very distinct and easy to be distinguished from any fit of fainting or temporary unconsciousness. “The merest tyro in medicine must know as much as this,” he added, with a contempt of the country practitioner who had maintained an opposite opinion.

This was absolutely the whole of the case for the defence. The speech of Mr. Serjeant Ryder was equally brief and pithy. He pointed out the vagueness of the evidence as to hour, and the fact that by the longest computation two hours was all the time allowed for such a sequence of events as the prosecution attempted to set forth; for the conception and carrying out of a murder by poison, the death of the deceased, the flight of the prisoner, all the developments of this tragic drama. "Never drama on the stage went more quickly," he cried; and he showed how innocent fright and panic might have quite naturally produced every sign which was put forth as a sign of guilt. What more natural than that, seeing her charge die before her eyes, her simple and somewhat feeble (as the court had perceived) and undeveloped intelligence should jump at the idea that she had herself been partially instrumental in the terrible event she had witnessed? He pointed out that the only inference which could be drawn from the testimony of those witnesses who had been present on the occasion was that the death of the deceased had been instantaneous, whereas Dr. Frankfort had proved to them, beyond dispute, that no death by opium could be instantaneous, that the poison required a certain time to do its work, a

time which was not afforded by the short interval between 11 o'clock, which the witness Johnson had heard striking while the voice of the deceased was still loud and angry, and 12.40, when the unfortunate prisoner left Sterborne by the train. These dates, he added, placed the case beyond the category of possibilities. And with this brief and unsensational address he sat down.

All this—the case for the defence altogether,—did not occupy an hour. The audience held their breath. They stared at each other like people fallen from some sudden height. Was it possible that they had been spending their interest and tears all for nothing?—for an untenable case, a thing which had been from the commencement impossible had they taken the trouble to examine? The jurymen's faces lighted up. After all it might not be necessary to convict the young creature who was called "My lady." They would have recommended her to mercy, no doubt, and done everything they could to cancel their decision, had they been compelled to make one in an adverse sense. But now their relieved feelings showed in their countenances, which brightened to the new possibilities unfolded before them. One or two only remained cloudy. The rest prepared with a cheerful confidence, seeing themselves almost out

of the wood, and as eager to be relieved as Innocent, to hear the judge's summing-up. Mr. Justice Molyneux was very great in this grand point of a judge's duty. It was one of "the greatest intellectual treats" to hear him. But, perhaps, he was not quite himself that day. He commented upon the evidence in a style which was not marked by his usual force and freedom. He said something civil about Mrs. Eastwood. He noticed slightly the touching, though altogether irregular, address of the prisoner. He pointed out to the jury that, though circumstances had at one time seemed overwhelmingly against her, and though her own evident impression that she was guilty, her precipitate flight, her repeated confession, seemed in one point of view to establish her guilt—there was a more charitable interpretation to be put on all these strange proceedings. It was possible, as the prisoner's counsel had suggested, that simple fright and terror might be at the bottom of them instead of guilt. Other cases had occurred in which an innocent person had accused himself of terrible crimes such as he had never committed. The jury was called upon to weigh all these contending arguments with the most serious care, and judge whether the panic of guilt or the panic of mere fright was at work upon the mind of the prisoner. He need not

tell them that where there was a doubt, she was entitled to the benefit of that doubt. The conduct and avowals of the prisoner herself made the chief foundation the prosecution had to build upon; and the destruction of the phial by the prisoner's family was no doubt very strongly against her. The judge then called their attention to the only, but most important point, on which the defence was founded. It was backed by an authority which, to many people, would seem infallible; but yet there were minds to which no one is infallible, and it was proverbial that doctors differed on the most important subjects. If they believed that Dr. Frankfort was right, and that poisoning by opium was impossible in so short a time, then their only course would be to acquit the prisoner; but if, on the other hand, they proposed to take the opinion of a younger disciple of Esculapius, then the case remained as the very able and striking speech of the counsel for the prosecution left it. Fortunately the whole matter lay in a nutshell. If they accepted the confessions of the prisoner, which some minds might be inclined to do—for there could be no doubt that an unsolicited confession of guilt was a very grave matter, and could not be disregarded—and considered the after-circumstances as confirmatory of her guilt—

they would find her guilty, though he did not think that even in that case there was any evidence to prove premeditation, and the offence must bear a less solemn appellation than that of murder; but if, on the other hand, they believed the distinct affirmation of the great physician whose evidence (delivered he need not say in the clearest and most satisfactory manner) they had just heard, they would understand that, notwithstanding her own impression of guilt, and whatever might be the intention with which the potion was administered, it was physically impossible that the prisoner could have committed the crime laid to her charge.

There was a pause when the judge finished; then an attempt at applause, suppressed by the officials, who, after their failure on the previous day to silence Innocent, were doubly on the alert. Then the crowd grew suddenly still, and every man looked at his neighbour. The excitement grew intense. The next sound everybody felt must be the words of the verdict, the "Guilty" or "Not Guilty," which should be life or death. I will not attempt to describe the feelings of those principally concerned. I think they had come to that point when feeling becomes impossible, the mind having gone through all its stages. They waited, not daring to look up,

not daring to think. The two least concerned were the accused and her counsel. She, because that gleam of sky through the window had caught her wandering soul; he, because he felt sure of his verdict. And thus they waited—in the silence, in the awful suspense which subdues a great rustling, restless crowd into unnatural many-breathing stillness, waiting for the issues of life and death.

What visions went and came in that moment! Nelly—with her feverish eyes saw—or was it a dream?—Ernest's face look out from the depths of the crowd and then vanish. Sir Alexis saw, not a scaffold—that was impossible—but a gloomy array of prisons, rising, one beyond another, as the suspense continued. Death in life—would not that be worse than death itself?

CHAPTER XVII.

DELIVERED.

THE jury were not agreed. Though the case lay in a nutshell, the nut was for the moment too hard for them. One or two indignant Battyites held the field against the gentler souls who had been so overjoyed to seize upon the possibility of a favourable verdict. If she had been a poor girl, who would have inquired whether or not there was time for the poison to take effect? and what had that to do with the question? asked the recalcitrants. Murder was meant—could any one doubt it, when the murderess herself confessed it? What had justice and Englishmen come to, if they let a criminal off because she was “my lady”? Thus two revolutionaries dissolved the court, kept in tortures of suspense the unhappy persons most concerned, and filled the town once more with the buzzing and

commotion of a curious crowd. The unhappy twelve were shut up again, far from their homes and comfort; the judge wended his way with dissatisfied countenance to his dinner, at which he spoke in terms not flattering of the British juryman; and a group of very miserable people assembled in the lodging opposite to the prison. They were doubly miserable, because none of them were allowed to see the unfortunate girl whom they knew to be there alone, unsupported by any sympathy, bearing the burden of suspense without any alleviation. They gathered round the table, making a miserable pretence at a meal, from which Sir Alexis, however, escaped ere it was half over, in the restlessness of misery, to wander under the window where his poor little bride, the unfortunate young creature with whose name his name and fame were inextricably connected, lay alone, beyond the reach of any gentle voice; while poor Nelly withdrew, weeping, to conceal the additional pangs of her own unthought-of pain. Was it Ernest whose face she had seen? Was he coming back again to rend or to console her heart? Was he waiting the result to decide the question for him? She hated herself for being able to think of this personal question; yet how was it possible to shut it out?

Mr. Justice Molyneux had his own troubles on that painful day. He disliked having anything to do with cases in which what he called "private feeling" must be more or less involved. He was angry with the Eastwoods for being connected prospectively with himself, and with Innocent for being connected with the Eastwoods. He was angry with his son for keeping on that lingering, absurd engagement, which ought to have come to a conclusion one way or another a year ago. He hoped now that Ernest would see his folly; and yet privately within himself, the man who—whatever he was besides—was a man, and no weakling, despised his son for not standing by the girl whom he professed to love. He had seen this girl, whom he himself had, so to speak, received into his family, to whom he had given a fatherly kiss as Ernest's future wife, by herself, with the high, though passive, courage of a woman, standing by her cousin in her trouble; and, though he was glad on the whole that his son "kept himself out of it," yet in the depths of his soul he was ashamed that a son of his should have so poorly played the man. Had Ernest been there, dancing attendance on the family in trouble, his father would have denounced him as an incurable

fool ; but he would have respected him, notwithstanding his folly. Now he was glad that things had turned out as they had done ; but he despised Ernest, and blushed—so far as a judge and man of the world *can* blush—at the thought that he himself had been instrumental in bringing such a poor creature into the world. He was wroth, too, to have this wretched business prolonged for another day—to have those Eastwoods constantly before his eyes, and that solitary Nelly with her white face. They were as much in his way as ever Haman was to Mordecai. He hated to see them—he felt ashamed before them—he wished the business well over for the poor little idiot at the bar, who was as mad as a March hare no doubt, but pretty, poor thing ! Mad for Frederick Eastwood ? Heaven above, what idiots women are !

These reflections, however, did not interfere with his dinner, of which the excellent judge had great need, for hard work, in which there is a mixture of emotion (as much emotion again as a judge can be expected to feel), is very exhausting, and whets a naturally excellent appetite. He had fortunately come to the end of the more substantial part of his repast, when a sudden message was brought to him. The jury had made up their minds ! What was to

be done? Were they to be held in vile durance for a whole night after this desirable result had been obtained? Was the accused to be kept in the agonies of suspense for the same period? And, finally, which was perhaps the most important of all—was business to be delayed next morning by the reintroduction of this case, which had already taken up the court during two days? The judge made up his mind, though not without some internal groanings. He called his retinue about him; sent hasty warnings to the counsel for the different sides, and to all the principal parties involved; and, donning his robes, took his way once more to the Town Hall, causing great commotion among the groups in the streets. Lights were hastily lighted, doors hastily thrown open, and the agitated street emptied itself at once in a throng—gentle and simple together, the ragamuffin and the righteous member of society for once in their lives side by side—into the dim and dingy Town Hall, with its hugh, staring portraits of mayors and lord-lieutenants, faintly lighted up by the flaring gas, and its dust-coloured walls looking more dingy than ever in the unwonted light.

Innocent was seated on her poor bed, dull and passive, and alone. She had ceased to think of the

sky through the window, and the world out of doors, and the hope of going home. To be without imagination is sometimes an advantage, but very often it is a great misfortune. Poor Innocent, being almost destitute of this quality, had not strength of vitality to remind herself that to-morrow was on its way, and might bring her deliverance. The dimness and the terrible solitude fell upon her like things eternal. She could not rouse herself to feel that this dreary night, which was again closing over her, would ever end. The darkness had fallen upon her mind like lead, weighing her down to the very ground. It seemed something from which she could never more get free, from which escape was impossible. She was not thinking. She was past the possibility of thought. She sat listless, in a dull trance of pain, incapable of motion or of feeling. When the key grated in the lock, when the door was suddenly thrown open, and figures dark, against the light which streamed behind them, rushed in with haste and excitement to call her, she rose, dazed and stupefied, because they told her to do so, tied on her little bonnet because they bade her, and followed for the same reason, with her faculties so dull and dead that nothing which could have happened would have roused, much less surprised her. She held

mechanically by the woman who had attended her during those two weary days, but she did not ask, not even of herself in her thoughts, where they were taking her, or what was the cause of this sudden interruption of the dismal stillness. The reign of phantasmagoria had come back again; the strange dingy court with its lights, the strange sea of faces, all whirled about the girl,—something which had no connexion with her, no meaning, an inarticulate dream. She gazed straight before her with her scared eyes which saw nothing. She held fast to the woman, the only point of reality which felt steady in this whirl of sight and sound. What it meant was all dark to Innocent. A vague sense that something was about to be done to her crept gradually upon her bewildered faculties. Somehow, she could not tell how, the scene seemed to mingle with that old scene in the Methodist chapel, so that she could not tell whether some sudden chance had transported her there again, and whether these moving figures which seemed about to approach her were those of the men whom she had supposed to threaten her life. She turned wildly to look if there was any way of escape. Alas, this time poor Innocent could not flee. She was surrounded, shut in, secured on all sides. It seemed to her that she

heard her own name out of the midst of that terrible spectral crowd. Ah, what was coming? what was coming? With a cry which rang through the whole building, which reached the crowd outside, which echoed for days through the ears of every one who heard it, she shrank back into the corner where she stood back, cowering and hiding her face with her hands.

What happened next? I do not think that Innocent ever knew. She was the centre of a confusion and tumult, from which after a while there slowly merged the face of Sir Alexis close to hers, quivering with emotion and joy. Then his voice, saying, "It is all over, my darling, we are going home——" then strange low cries and sounds of weeping—sounds in which Innocent, benumbed, had no power to join; then a breath of air,—wild, sweet fresh air of the spring night, suddenly blowing upon her face, as if it had never been caught and confined within four walls; and then she knew nothing more.

"The girl has gone mad," said Mr. Justice Molyneux, as he threw off his robes, "and I have a dozen minds to commit the jurymen for wilful murder—well—or contempt of court if you will—it comes to much the same thing."

She was acquitted—that was the end,—whether or

not too late to save her tottering reason no one knew. Even Batty himself and his warmest partisans had been struck dumb by that cry. "She's got off; but the Lord hasn't let her off," cried some one of those virulent censors who are so ready to undertake that God must agree with them; but the crowd cried "Shame" upon the vindictive suggestion. They kept back the malcontents with instinctive sympathy, while poor Innocent was half led, half carried out by a side-door towards the rooms where Mrs. Eastwood, happily unconscious of the crisis, was trying to sleep after nights of sleepless anxiety. As Innocent was thus led away some one else rushed to the door of the Town Hall, meeting the crowd as it poured forth, meeting the lawyers who stood about in groups discussing the matter. "I have brought the doctor!" he shouted vaguely at the wigged figure of Mr. Ryder, the only one distinguishable in the uncertain light. John Vane caught at the young man's arm in the crowd. "It is all over," he said, "thank God! She is safe, and it is all over." Jenny Eastwood fell back upon the doctor, whom he had hunted after so long, whom he had brought so far, and who was now surrounded by a crowd of eager friends, shaking hands with him. If he had been but a year or two younger I think the boy

would have cried in the bitterness of his disappointment. All this for nothing! and Innocent saved without him, when he was away, without any need of his services! Though he gulped his trouble down in a moment, and faced John Vane, who was looking at him kindly, with a countenance instantaneously subdued out of the quiver of pain that had passed over it, Jenny had as sharp a pang to bear in that moment as might have supplied discomfort enough for a year. "Never mind. It was best to do it anyhow," he said, feeling the sting go through and through him, and scarcely conscious of anything else.

"Quite right," said Vane; "though like most great efforts it is not to have any reward. Come home with me, Jenny. They are all here. I don't think we could have lived out another night."

"Who are 'we'?" said Jenny cautiously.

"All of us," said Vane, with the water in his eyes. He could have cried too, for other motives than those of Jenny. He had not thought of himself—he had not even in his generosity thought of Nelly until that moment. But he had been with her constantly during the few days which appeared to them all like so many years. He had stood by her when there was no one else to stand by her, when

even her mother, as a witness, was not allowed to be with her child, he had been Nelly's brother, her support, her companion,—he and not the other; and was the other to come in now, when all was over, to take the reward which he had not earned, to share the ease when he had not shared the trouble? A poignant sense of injustice began immediately to combat in Vane's mind with a great many other feelings. Is there any simple, unmingled feeling, any primitive unity of thought, possible to men in these days? something of the sort had been forced upon all this group during Innocent's danger; they had been conscious of but one thought and one purpose—that of saving her. But now that she was saved, do you suppose that simple joy was enough to fill up these complex souls? They were all off in a moment, each into his separate labyrinth, conscious of the relief, but chiefly because that relief allowed the presence of other evils to be felt. Jenny, poor boy, had a very tangible cause for his disappointment. He had laboured in vain, and spent his strength for nought, and the others who had not done half so much as he had got the reward. Thus his feelings were somewhat analogous to those which had burst into sudden life in the mind of Vane. Both of them mastered their feelings, and began to talk of the

trial, and how it had come to this happy issue. But the man and the boy felt very much alike in the sudden shock and revulsion. They had laboured and suffered, and others had the reward.

Dear reader, I will not insist upon carrying you into all the strange excitement which filled those little lodgings. Innocent, when she was taken into the unknown room, seemed to have suddenly frozen again into the Innocent who had arrived two years before at The Elms. She suffered Nelly to hang about her, to place her in a chair, to bring her a footstool, to take off her bonnet, with the same passive stare which had bewildered them all in the old days. I believe if Frederick had come in at that moment she would have turned to him as she had then, falling back upon her first friend. But Frederick, fortunately, was not there. The mob, not willing altogether to lose a victim, and urged on by certain hot partisans of Batty, had detected him on his way to his mother's lodgings, and had so hooted and mobbed and jeered him, that he had taken refuge, in high disgust and profound humiliation, in the railway station. Frederick, as I have often said, held reputation high, though he did a great deal in secret to forfeit it; and this vulgar assault, and the supreme horror of hearing himself called names—himself,

Frederick Eastwood, the most important figure in the world to his own thinking,—so worked upon him, coupled with the sense that a few ruffians even lingered without to renew the operation as soon as he reappeared, that he took the next train for London, telegraphing from thence to Sir Alexis his joy and congratulations. He had not cut a very exalted figure altogether at the trial of his cousin for the murder of his wife. The Sealing Wax Office is too important a branch of the economy of the State not to have departments in the larger colonies, and branches all over the world. Frederick accepted a colonial appointment the very next day. It was the only thing to be done in his circumstances; and except his mother, I doubt if any one much regretted his departure; but mothers have a way of thinking well of their children—a prejudice which, perhaps, if not very wise, is still good for the world.

Innocent was roused a little out of her stupor when she was taken up-stairs to the room where Mrs. Eastwood lay, trying to rest, because she had promised to do so, and wondering what the sounds might be down-stairs, the sounds as of many feet passing outside, which honour and her promise forbade her from noticing. She gave a great cry, and sprang from her sofa to catch Innocent in her arms,

when she was led in by Nelly in order that her mother's eyes when she woke should open upon the saved one.

“As if I could sleep with one of you in danger!” Mrs. Eastwood cried, weeping. Innocent did not leave her all night, and gradually by slow degrees the warmth came back to her heart, as warmth and life come back to the limbs of a creature frozen and benumbed by drowning, or by exposure to the cold. When she slept, which was not for a long time, her smile came back to her in dreams, and then a faint shadow of colour to her white cheek; and when she woke, she woke herself again—the Innocent of Longueville, the budding, half-expanded soul who had begun to reward the toils of all those who had tended her. With wonder and joy they watched her, —not mad, not vacant—not stupefied, recovering as a flower does that has been trodden upon, but from which no passing misfortune can take its elasticity. While they wondered and speculated whether it was safe to say anything to her of the proceedings of the past days, she went of herself to the window, and looked across at the dreary old prison walls. They saw her gazing at this dreary building, and waited, no one daring to speak. At last she turned to them with a soft smile.

"Which was my window?" she said.

They all came hurrying round to prove to her how safe she was, how entirely delivered from the gloomy duration of yesterday, and pointed it out to her with smiles and tears.

"That one!" said Innocent, still smiling. "I wish I had known it was so near. What a little way! and you sat here and watched me? It was almost the same as being at home."

Why did they all kiss her, with those tears? She accepted the kisses and dried the tears with her handkerchief, with a half-laughing gesture like a child's.

"Yes, *almost* the same," she repeated, lingering upon the word with a strange, smiling pathos, which gave to it a double suggestiveness. She stood long at the window thus smiling, saying nothing more—as the soul may smile which has newly-arrived in heaven—in a trance of celestial wonder to find out, after all, how little way it is from the prison window to the light of the everlasting home.

And after this she became perfectly tranquil, and prepared for her journey home, and did what she was told, with no apparent consciousness that anything very extraordinary had happened to her. Sir Alexis, much more shaken, looking old, as though

ten years had passed over his head, was eager to take advantage of this calm, and carry her back to Longueville without delay.

“She must be ill—this cannot last. After all that she has gone through, her health must give way sooner or later,” he said. But he was much more likely to be ill himself than was Innocent. She, in the simple unity of her feelings, had not felt half nor a third part so much as he had felt—as he felt still. For all the complications of sentiment, the horror of publicity, the man’s humiliation at having his domestic privacy intruded upon, at having his marriage discussed, his wife’s name bandied about from one vulgar mouth to another, every circumstance of his life laid bare—had no existence for Innocent. She had felt the actual horrors of loneliness, vague alarm, sickening personal terror, made stronger by ignorance. But these were all; and when she was alone no longer, when she was freed from her prison, surrounded by her friends, no longer frightened or forsaken, the weight was taken at once from Innocent’s head. She thought nothing of the publicity, and was not conscious of the shame.

But Sir Alexis was conscious of it—very conscious. He felt to his very heart that years would have to elapse before his young bride could be seen any-

where without being pointed out as "the woman who was tried for murder." He knew that in society most people would believe, or at least say, whether they believed it or not, that she had been guilty; and that everybody would make sure that she had loved Frederick Eastwood, a hypothesis very galling to her husband. Thus, though Innocent was saved, he was not saved, nor could be all his life, from the consequences of this prosecution. The newspapers began to comment upon it immediately after its termination, and to characterize it as entirely vindictive—a case which no good barrister should have undertaken, for which no grand jury ought to have brought in a true bill. "Everybody knows that under certain physical conditions, there is nothing so common as self-accusation," said the *Thunderer*; "and that murder is the favourite crime selected by the victims of this mania." These discussions were all in Innocent's favour: but oh, how terrible is the favour of the newspapers to a young girl—a young wife of eighteen! Better a hundred times that they should even damn her instantaneously and let her go!

Thus Sir Alexis hastened back with his bride to Longueville, telling her fondly that everything was over that could harm her, and that they should now

begin their old, sweet life once more. But, alas ! that sweet life was gone like the winter snow ; for the man who was no longer young, who could not hope to live to forget or see it forgotten, that life would return no more.

CHAPTER XVIII.

JENNY'S MEDITATION.

‘NELLY, where is Molyneux?’ asked her brother abruptly. Jenny had just come back from the railway station, where he had been seeing Innocent off. He was not in a very light-hearted humour; I can scarcely tell why. The boy was a far-seeing boy—he might have private reasons of his own which increased his predisposition to see things in an uncomfortable light; but, at all events, Jenny was of opinion that Innocent’s chances of happiness were somewhat diminished; and, being uncomfortable himself, he had no particular objection to make other people uncomfortable. Besides, he had perceived, with his quick eyes, that his sister had “something on her mind”—and he was disposed to help her to deliver herself. Mrs. Eastwood and Nelly were going on a visit to Miss Vane at the High Lodge,

and then they were to proceed to Longueville. They were all rather glad to escape from home and their anxious friends until the great event of Innocent's trial had lost something of its freshness and novelty. Mrs. Eastwood, too, was much shaken in health by all her anxieties and vigils; and to see Nelly's pale face, with dark lines under the eyes, and the shadowy resemblance to Innocent, which grew more apparent as she grew sadder, was more than enough to warrant Jenny in his conclusion that she had something on her mind. She started nervously when he addressed this question to her. She had not so much as named Ernest to any one since they came to Sterrington, and in the excitement of other anxieties, and absorption of all things in Innocent, she had not been questioned on the subject even by her mother. This was one reason why Nelly was so pale:—she had to reveal to them all the change of affairs. She had to acknowledge to herself formally, in so many words, that it was all over. She had to wind up this chapter of her early life, and agree that it was ended, and communicate the fact to everybody. And Nelly, not feeling herself able to take the initiative, had been burdened and weighed down by the secret, which no one shared, more than I can say.

“Ernest?” she said, with a sudden flush,—and

then added, more quietly, "at home, I suppose,—for anything I know——"

"Why was he not here with you?" said Jenny, pursuing his inquiries steadily. "There was nothing to detain him, I know; for he did come to see how things were going on——"

"Ah! I was right, then!" said Nelly, "it was his face I saw.—Tell me what was the meaning of it, Jenny, dear.—Tell me all you know.—How did you find out he had been here?—and why, why did he come here without coming to me——?"

"Are you still fond of Molyneux, Nelly?"

"Oh, don't ask me any questions," she cried, with the impatience of suffering, "tell me all you know!"

"Look here," said Jenny; "a great deal that is not nice is said about women. For my part, I am inclined to stand up for women. I'm a woman's son, which tells for something—and a fellow that has been brought up to be your brother, Nelly, likes girls in a way.—But, look here—it will go a long way to convince me that you are all people say—silly, pig-headed, unreasonable, and more fond of your own way than of anything else in the world—if you, Nelly Eastwood, a girl of some sort of character, go and break your heart for that prig Molyneux, when you

can have a brick like John Vane for the picking up——”

“Jenny! how dare you speak to me so?”

“Oh, as for daring, I’m not afraid of you,” said Jenny calmly, “nor I don’t mind what I say.—What, a fellow that leaves you in that court by yourself—a fellow that knows all about law and that sort of thing, and never offers help or advice—that’s ready to come in and take the good of you when we’re all well at home, but can’t stand by you for a day when you’re in trouble!—By Jove!” cried Jenny, who was not addicted to expletives,—“a whipper-snapper of a fellow at the best, who is no more fit to be put by the side of John Vane than—I am! If you show yourself such a fool, Nelly, there’s nothing that was ever said about women so bad but I’ll believe it—I’ll give you up for ever, you and all the rest!”

Jenny took a turn round the little room at the end of this speech to work off the vehemence of his feelings. But as for Nelly, all her spirit, all her self-will, all her sense of fun had died out of her. She tried to be angry and could not—she tried to laugh and could not. Her heart ached with confused and complicated pangs of suffering. If I was to try to lay bare that mystery of diverse pain, the only readers who would follow me through it would

probably be women who understand it without description. Nelly had not lived all this time between these two men without having been forced into the same way of thinking as her brother expressed so forcibly. She too had been compelled to admit to herself, by imperceptible degrees—first with a secret rage against Vane, with indignation at herself, with grief, with sore perception of a hundred minute points of difference which went to her heart, that the man whom she had supposed she loved was not the equal of the other man who loved her. How she had resisted and fought against this conviction! how she had struggled, bringing up before herself Ernest's good qualities, his superior talents (and everybody knows that a man of genius cannot be bound by the same rules as other men), his greater youth (for of course men become considerate as they grow older), and the influence of his family, which was not of an elevating kind; how by and by she had sunk into silence (with herself) on the subject, tacitly allowing Vane's excellence, and falling back upon the main fact that he was not Ernest; until this last chapter of all, when her appeal to Ernest had been made in vain, when he had accepted her farewell, abandoned her side, left her without even a word of consolation during the trial—when

he had wounded her heart and outraged her pride and delicacy, and left no plea possible to be made for him, even by the most subtle advocate. The mere fact that he had been her accepted lover, that the dreams of the future had all woven themselves about him, that he had kissed her virgin lips, and held her virgin hand, was the only link which now bound Nelly, by one of the fantastic unformulated laws of a girl's code of honour, to Ernest Molyneux. This had been so; and to such a girl as Nelly Eastwood the bond so made was one which it was shame and torture to break, or to think of as having existed when once broken. All girls do not feel in this way; but then all girls are not alike, any more than all men are—which is a doctrine curious and strange, I am aware, to many critics. All these different pangs and griefs were surging through her mind as Jenny cut the knot of her hidden thoughts and boldly broached the subject which she had not dared so much as to whisper a word of. And yet it had to be spoken about. Ernest had not even written to her; he had accepted the dismissal she had given him in her haste, and the fact must be made known and recognized. She made no answer for some time to Jenny's tirade, but at last she burst forth piteously in tones which he could not resist.

“ Oh, Jenny, tell me all you know ; it is not from any weak wish—what I want is to know—Why did he come ? and why did he not come here ? What did he say ? I will tell you everything there is to tell, if you will first tell me what you know !——”

“ Nelly, I hope you are not such a fool as you look,” said the boy severely. “ I met him at the junction half way, where the train stops. He was going up ; I was coming down. He said he had been to see how the trial was going on, that things looked rather bad, that I had better make haste with my doctor, that doctors were no good, for they would swear against each other through thick and thin, and that if we’d had our wits about us we’d have packed Innocent off to Australia or somewhere as soon as we knew, and that she’d never get over it, nor any of us, as long as she lived, if they acquitted her twenty times over. Then he gave me a nod, and the train went off. It was a pleasant meeting,” said Jenny ; “ if it hadn’t been that I had the doctor to look after, and my head full of poor Innocent, and some thoughts of you, Nelly, if you can care for such a fellow—by Jove ! I’d have dragged him out of the carriage window and pitched him across the rails—it would have served him right.”

“ Jenny, my dear boy,” said Mrs. Eastwood,

coming in, "does not poor Innocent's great misfortune show you the folly of such threats? I don't know of whom you were speaking; but I am sure you didn't mean what you say, whoever it was. Don't say such things, dear. You wouldn't hurt any one——"

"Wouldn't I though!" cried Jenny, indignant. "You may trust me, mother, if I had the chance. If ever man deserved a good licking, it's him."

"Oh, Jenny, don't!" said Nelly in a sharp tone of pain.

The mother looked from one to the other. She did not ask any questions. I suspect the mystery was not so profound to her as poor Nelly had thought it.

"We have had enough of such talk," she said. "Nelly, Miss Vane is to come for us at three o'clock, and Jenny's train is still earlier. I wish we were all out of this place which has brought us nothing but misfortune——"

"I don't call the Vanes misfortunes," said Jenny.

"Ah, the Vanes!" his mother replied, with a relaxation of all the lines in her face; and then she smiled, and said, "Come, Nelly. I hope the humours of the nunnery will blow some of our cobwebs away."

Jenny thought the metaphor very confused as he went out, leaving them to their packing, and, no doubt, to confidences more distinct than Nelly had given to himself. But he was a lad of understanding, and he perceived all that had happened. Yes, the metaphor was very confused—how could humours blow cobwebs away? There was this to be said about women certainly, that the language they used was very often inexact, though it might be forcible enough. For instance, Jenny acknowledged to himself his mother could polish off a fellow very neatly when occasion served—and he had no doubt she would polish off Molyneux in a way that would leave nothing to be desired. But still the metaphor was confused; he was thinking how to put it when he encountered Vane, who had a restless way of taking walks abroad when there was nothing else to be done. Jenny joined himself to the elder man whom he admired, and went over the town with him, looking at the public buildings with vague curiosity. The Assizes were still going on, and groups standing about the Town Hall, as they had been when poor Innocent stood at the bar; but to Innocent's cousins it seemed that it was years since the trial had ended, though they paused, and looked with a long-drawn breath at the place where other people might be

suffering the same anxieties which now had ended for them.

"I wonder," said Jenny, bringing this perennial train of thought suddenly in, to break the lighter tone of their conversation, "I wonder if Molyneux is right—if she'll never get over it, as long as she lives."

"If—who—will never get over it?" asked Vane.

"Innocent; that's what he said—I suppose he knows society, and that sort of thing; though she was acquitted twenty times—that she would never get over it as long as she lived."

"All that comes very well from Molyneux," said Vane, growing red—"who has never done anything, so far as I know, to help either Innocent—or your family, Jenny—to whom he was beholden——"

"Well," said Jenny, with an indifferent air, "it's an ill wind that blows nobody good. I believe poor Innocent's trial has done what nothing else could have done—convinced Nelly at last that this fellow Molyneux——"

"You don't mean it!" cried Vane.

Jenny, who had taken his arm, felt Vane "jump," as he said after, and knew that his chance shot had taken full effect.

"But I do," said Jenny composedly. "I had not time to get it all out of her; but I am quite sure of this much, at least, that all is over between them—and time too. Why, the fellow actually came down here—to see how things were going—and never went near them. Nelly saw him in the court. A girl would be a fool indeed—which Nelly ain't, for I know the sort of girl she is—if she put up with that——"

How John Vane "jumped" to be sure! what a nervous fellow he was, though big enough for anything, and with that beard! so Jenny thought, as he felt his companion's arm thrill, and enjoyed it. I don't think Vane made any immediate response, good or bad. He managed to make Jenny talk, which was more to the purpose; but I don't think he committed himself in words; nor was it until they had gone a long way through the streets, and Jenny had recollected that the time approached for his train, that John Vane's feelings burst forth in speech.

"Jenny, old fellow," he said, "is there anything you want—books, or that? or a little spare tin that you don't care to speak to your mother about? Make me your banker, old boy."

Jenny withdrew his arm from that of his friend.

He was quite as tall, and, barring the beard, not much less imposing in muscular magnitude. The boy stood almost on equal terms, as Englishmen love to have them, with his elder companion. He looked Vane seriously, even anxiously, in the face—and addressed him slowly.

“ Do you think she'll have you? ” he said.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE NUNNERY.

THE Eastwoods spent several weeks at the High Lodge. They saw it at its very best, in all the spring blossoming, when the trees put on their most delicate greenery, and all the children, big and little, and all the orphans, and even the young ladies of the upper school got "their new things" for Easter. I am not sure that Mrs. Eastwood entered as she intended to do into "the humours" of the establishment. She disapproved of a great many things. She disapproved, for instance, totally of Father Featherstone, who directed the consciences of the community, and walked about indoors in a soutane, out of doors in a very ugly black cloak, an insignificant little individual, of whom Miss Vane and her sisters professed to stand much in awe, a profession in which Mrs. Eastwood did not believe. She herself

disliked the odd little nondescript, and still more strongly disapproved of him. "Why should you neglect the clergy of the parish?" she said. "I think your rector might have good reason to be affronted——"

"But my rector is not affronted. He has no time to look after our services," said the lady-abbess.

Mrs. Eastwood, however, was not convinced. She shook her head at Father Featherstone's petticoats. She asked whether it was supposed that there was anything wicked in a man's ordinary dress? and called the poor little priest "it," with a shocking Protestantism, which was terrible to Miss Vane. But John Vane, who was there constantly,—not as an inmate, for that would have been considered impossible at the High Lodge,—but as a visitor,—took Mrs. Eastwood's hint with peals of profane laughter. "*Ni homme,—ni femme,—prêtre,*" he said, when he saw the black-robed father making his way through the sunshiny April gardens,—and laughed and coaxed his sister who loved him, as pious sisters often love scoffing brothers, out of all offence. Miss Vane herself admitted that she could not go against Reginald,—no one in the family had ever been able to go against him. "But everybody calls Mr. Vane John——" said Nelly. "My dear,

there never was a John in our family," said Sister Lætitia, with momentary tartness; but then she added, softening,—“You shall call him John, if you like, Nelly.” To such a sudden, insidious attack, what could Nelly answer? She professed not to be aware of the meaning of the things that were said to her. She made a conscientious endeavour not to allow herself to feel that her heart was a great deal lighter than it had been, now that there was no struggle of divided duty;—and when Jenny’s bold comparison of one man with another came into her mind, she tried to think that it was novel to her, that it was indifferent to her,—that she had nothing to do with such a question.—And in reality Nelly shrank, as every pure-minded and high-spirited girl naturally does, from the thought of replacing one with another, of giving her hand into the hand of another; the transfer was horrible to her, even though her heart had made it unawares. At the end of a fortnight, indeed, John Vane went abruptly away, leaving time and silence to work for him. He too saw that an immediate transfer was a thing impossible, though his sister was slow to see it. “Why shouldn’t they settle it all at once and get done with it?” Miss Vane said; “I never had any time to waste in

nonsense. They will be far happier if they make up their minds at once." And perhaps, on the whole, she was right. But what does it matter who is right when fantastic questions of feeling are to be considered?

When John Vane went away, Nelly breathed more freely. She had got free from the toils in which her foolish, youthful feet had been caught unawares. She ran about the High Lodge as she had been used to do at The Elms, with that tinkle of her pleasant steps like a brook, that flutter of her coming and going like a bird among the branches, which had been peculiar to her in the old days at home. There was perpetual movement of light young steps and gleam of cheerful faces in that well-populated place; but Nelly's kept their special character, and were always recognizable. I do not think, for my own part, that Ernest Molyneux enjoyed his release as Nelly did. I don't believe he enjoyed it all. And this was strictly poetic justice, as the gentle reader will perceive who remarks how Molyneux worried Nelly, and rent her gentle being in twain. He has been very bitter about women ever since, and he it is, I am informed, who has written the most virulent of those articles on the subject which have appeared from time to time in a very able and

amiable periodical known to all men. Let us hope that in thus developing his sentiments he found as much ease to his mind as Nelly did when, after her long and feverish struggle to keep loving him and approving of him, to keep faithful to her promise, and steadfast in her duty, she got free from his toils, and turned her back on love, and healed herself among the spring blossoms and the admiring girls at the High Lodge. How they all admired her! She was not so saintly, not so abstracted as poor Innocent, predoomed (they thought) to the crown of martyrdom. But Nelly could do so many things; she was so clever, she was so pretty; and was it not whispered in the community that she had rejected one lover, because he had failed to come up to the full standard of her ideal; and had they not seen how Mr. Vane, whom everybody at the High Lodge regarded as the very type of manly excellence, was at her feet? The girls thought there had never been any one seen so delightful as Nelly. They copied her very tones, her little gestures, her modes of speech; and Nelly healed herself of her long warfare in the midst of the cheerful order of the community, amongst the girls and the flowers.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT BECAME OF LADY LONGUEVILLE.

SIR ALEXIS took his wife abroad early in the summer. His former intentions of spending the season in town, and producing his beautiful new prize in the world for the envy of all beholders, had been of course abandoned. To take her away, to keep her quiet, to abstract the too well-known Lady Longueville from the observation of all spectators, was his only policy now; and the pang with which Sir Alexis consented to this necessity was all the more severe that he was too proud to disclose it to any one. Even to Innocent's friends he said nothing of the mortification and disappointment which had replaced all his hopes. When the Eastwoods paid their visit at Longueville he was very kind, very attentive to them, but their visit was paid to a lonely and silent dwelling, which had already, in sentiment at least, abdicated its

supremacy. It was, it is true, more the show-house of the county than ever, and visitors came eager to inquire into the habits and looks of the Lady Longueville who had been tried for murder, but its stately calm of sovereignty was over. No guests entered its doors that year. The friends of Sir Alexis sent their cards to evidence their sympathy, but they were in town, or they were going abroad, or they were afraid to intrude upon his privacy at a moment of trouble; so that the great house was solitary as an island in the middle of the sea.

“I don’t think we shall attempt any society this year,” Sir Alexis said to Mrs. Eastwood, with a constrained smile. He was a gentleman, and he showed no signs either to Innocent or her friends of the heavy burden which he felt he had to bear. At least he concealed it from Innocent herself, and to some extent from Nelly; but Mrs. Eastwood read the proud man’s mortification in every look and word. And he had no deep and true love to fall back upon, only a faltering kindness and fondness for the poor little girl who was no longer the crown of the connoisseur’s collection, more delicate than his Dresden, more lovely than his best picture, a living Leonardo, as he had hoped the whole world would acknowledge her to be. Instead of remaining in that heaven of

passive art-perfection, Innocent had stepped un-awares into the living world, and had become the object of vulgar stares and curiosity, the heroine of a *cause célèbre*. Poor Sir Alexis! he bore it with stoical fortitude, but still the fact that he had much to bear became visible to instructed eyes. He became—not cross, it is too harsh a word—rather consciously forbearing and forgiving to his poor little wife. He made the best of her, but he was worried secretly by the simplicities which a little while before had been her crowning charm. He had to accept her as a woman instead of glorying in her as the highest triumph of art; and when he took her down from the pedestal he had himself erected, poor Innocent was not qualified to enact the part of woman as he understood it. She was a child, little more, perfect so long as you looked at her with the eyes of a connoisseur, but not perfect when the eyes that were turned upon her were those of a husband, very proud, and unwilling to fall below the mark which became a Lady Longueville. Alas, Innocent had not been trained to be Lady Longueville, the mistress of a great house, the companion of a man of the world. She was only Innocent—no more.

He took her abroad; he took her to Pisa, where, poor child, her recollections were sadly confused and

uncertain; and where even Niccolo—whom Sir Alexis, true to all that honour and kindness demanded of him, did not fail to seek out—appeared to her through a mist, not the same Niccolo she had known, though his features were unaltered, and his delight at seeing her genuine. But Innocent had not lived at all consciously in those old days, and it struck her with strange wonder to find how little reality there was in her recollections of them, and how, in the midst of them, her heart would return to home. Home meant The Elms, however, to Innocent, not Longueville, nor her husband's pretty house in town, with all its treasures. But she went to Santa Maria della Spina, and said her prayers, though even that visit was paid with little comfort, for her husband was with her, not unindulgent of her prayers, but a little disquieted and annoyed by her long pause after them. Why should she sit there doing nothing? he wanted to know; especially as the little church was soon filled by a party of English travellers, to whom he felt some one was pointing out "the celebrated Lady Longueville—she whose case was in all the papers, you know." Sir Alexis could never get rid of this fear. Whenever any one looked at his wife (and whosoever has travelled in Italy knows the simple and honest admiration with

which all Italians, meaning no harm, regard beauty), Sir Alexis felt that they were staring at the woman who had been tried, the heroine of the murder case which had made so much noise in the papers. When any one in his hotel took up the travellers' book, he shuddered with the consciousness that Lady Longueville's name would be the first to be noticed. Thus he fretted himself day by day. I do not suppose that Innocent had the least idea of this in its full meaning and import, but she felt instinctively the change of atmosphere round her, the absence of that genial warmth to which her half-conscious soul had responded during the first days of their marriage, and the coming in of something new, irritating, and painful. The sensation was very strange to her. It was the first time she had ever been in an atmosphere of criticism—the first time she had ever felt the effect of that constant, involuntary watch upon herself and her actions with which a husband, no longer admiring, and not much in love, so often regards his wife. She began to wake up, poor child, to the necessity of considering her own words and ways, of thinking what she should do and what she should say to please him. Even this was not for a long time a conscious process in her mind, any more than Sir Alexis was conscious that his fretted and

troubled mental condition betrayed itself sufficiently plainly to command her comprehension. Neither was quite aware of what was going on between them, but yet life was changing to both, new influences coming into being, old things passing away.

The Longuevilles were gone for more than a year—they returned to England only towards the close of the London season, Sir Alexis being still anxious to avoid society, and afraid of the consequences of taking his young wife anywhere. They saw few people, except Mrs. Barclay, who did her best to be as kind and effusive as ever, but who was disappointed bitterly by all the consequences of her brother's marriage, with which she had been so much enchanted. There was now, however, an expectation which made up for a great many drawbacks to this good woman, and one about which she made herself very important and very busy. "After all, the old Longuevilles are not to die out," she said to all his friends; and in the flutter of that delightful hope she forgot the disadvantages which Innocent's misfortune had brought about—the banishment of her brother, and the fading of those glories which he had worn for so short a time. "It is almost forgotten by this time; take my word for it that if

next season is at all a good one, and if anything out of the way turns up, nobody will remember that such a thing ever happened," she said, by way of consolation to her brother, who was not in very good health, and who was in more fretful spirits than she had ever seen him. "A change of Ministry, or a Japanese Embassy, or even another scandal in high life, would make it all right for Innocent, even now. There are people, you know, who would make her a lion directly."

"A pleasant thing for a man to have his wife made a lion, and for such a cause," said Sir Alexis, with a growl, which was half of pain and half of irritation. Poor man! he was suffering from suppressed gout, I believe, as well as many mental maladies, of which the pangs are still more severe.

"Well, Alexis—but it is not so bad as it might have been," said Mrs. Barclay; "and before next season you will find it entirely forgotten, and Lady Twyford will present Innocent, and what with the heir we hope for, and all——"

Sir Alexis was mollified; but still he uttered another groan, not loud, but deep. He had lost his beautiful manners; he was not the serene man of the world, the urbane art collector and connoisseur, who had been pronounced delightful on all sides. To be

sure, his friends remarked, marriage of itself often produces something of this effect; a man no longer feels it necessary to please everybody when he has secured some one to please him, and this rule tells more surely with your old bachelor than with a young man. But yet there was more than this in the churlishness and irritability which often veiled his once benign countenance. Irritability and churlishness are hard words—too hard, perhaps, to apply to a man who consciously restrained himself, and was at all times a great deal sweeter and gentler than he might have been had he indulged his temper as he often wished to do. But he was ill in health, never having surmounted the excitement, horror, and anxiety of the trial, and he was not young enough to possess the elasticity which can throw off the effects of such a blow. And Innocent, who ought by all rules to have felt it most, had thrown it off entirely; she had never even been ill, which seemed to her husband (though he never said so) the most extraordinary proof of her want of feeling; it had scarcely affected her one way or another, though she was in reality the cause of it all, and ought to have been the chief sufferer; but it had nearly killed him. This gave him a second grievance, and subject of unexpressed complaint against his wife; but yet, with all

this sense of injury, and with all his consciousness that Innocent, as a woman and a wife, and the mistress of his house, was a failure, he was very good to her. He changed nothing in his mode of treating her. Nothing was changed save the atmosphere ; but then the atmosphere was precisely the one thing which moved Innocent, and in which she was capable of feeling the change.

And various strange thoughts had been working in her also during this year. She had learned to express herself in a different way, and she had learned—what Innocent had never done before—to restrain and conceal herself in some degree. Words would sometimes rise to her lips which she did not utter—a curious symptom of mental advance—and she learned unawares to step out of herself and shape her mind to her husband. She did more for him a great deal than at first. She read to him, whereas he had been used to read to her. “The Miller’s Daughter” had long slid back into the past, but she read the newspapers to him, and books about art, and tried hard to understand, and show at least a semblance of interest. She was fond of pictures by nature, though to read about them was very puzzling ; but even the newspapers Innocent attempted, and there were long tracts of reading which she got over

with her lips, though her mind escaped from them, and refused to have anything to do with those arid pastures. All this she strained at to please her husband—by the action of the profound, unexpressed, inarticulate conviction in her mind that she had ceased to please him. She was a very good nurse, at least, never weary, finding it possible to be quite still without occupation, without movement, when her patient required rest—ready to read to him as long as he pleased—to do whatever he pleased with a docility unbounded. Shortly after their return to England, Sir Alexis had occasion to put this quality to the fullest test. He was taken ill with a complication of disorders, and for a fortnight was in bed, nursed night and day by his wife, who would not leave him, though her own condition required a great deal more care than she gave it. Innocent, however, was impervious to all representations of this kind. “Me! I am well. I am quite well; I never was ill in my life,” she said, smiling upon the anxious matrons, her aunt and Mrs. Barclay, who regarded her proceedings with dismay. Even the hopes which excited the Longuevilles so much did not excite Innocent. Her passive mind did not awake to the future—her imagination was not yet active enough to fix even upon the kind of hope which moves

women most. The present was all she knew, and in that she lived and had her entire being.

Sir Alexis began to get well, and he was grateful, so far as he was able, for the devotion she had shown him. But yet his gratitude was tinctured by blame.

“It is very kind of you to nurse me; but when you think of the circumstances, Innocent, it would be still kinder not to wear out and tire yourself,” he said, in the half-weary tone of a man bound to give thanks, yet more willing to find fault. Very gentle was his fault-finding—but still it was fault-finding. He allowed her to sit by him all day as he recovered, but with a servant in the next room to do what he wanted, lest she should be fatigued. Even this consideration for her had a certain tacit reproof in it—a reproof too subtle to wake Innocent’s intellect, but which yet she felt eagerly as an evidence that she had not quite succeeded in pleasing him. He was not angry—he did not scold her; but yet he did not accept her service with that frank and perfect satisfaction which makes service happy. One of these days, however, Sir Alexis’s man, an old servant who had been long with him, got tired in his turn, and was replaced in the anteroom by another not so agreeable to the master. Innocent

took her old offices upon her with a furtive delight when she perceived this. She began again to administer her husband's medicine, to give him his drinks and tonics. In the afternoon, the patient became a little cross and restless. Something disturbed his calm, I cannot tell what—some crease in his pillow; some twist of the coverlet; or something, perhaps, in the news of the day, which Innocent had been reading. His mind took that evil turn which makes a man ready to be irritated by every trifle, to think of everything that is uncomfortable, and to say many things which are not pleasant to hear. All of us, I suppose, take this ill turn sometimes in the afternoon when the tide of being runs low, and every trifling contradiction becomes a wrong and injury to us. Sir Alexis tried to restrain himself, but he had not entirely succeeded. He even called for his attendant, and consciously vented his ill-temper on the man, that he might not be tempted further; but he had not quite exhausted the vein. Some time after this outbreak Innocent rose softly, and went to the table.

“Why cannot you keep still, Innocent?” he said fretfully, “when you know that you ought not to be constantly in motion! What is it now? You disturb more than I can say——”

“It is the hour for your tonic,” she said. She was standing with her face towards him, smiling at him, with the smile he had once thought so strangely beautiful—with a Venice glass in one hand, milky white, and of a graceful shape, the very cup for such a hand to hold. With the other she took a bottle from the table, still looking at him. “You are no wiser than me in this,” she said; “because it is bitter, you would rather forget it; but you must not forget——”

He lay and looked at her strangely. She was to him at that moment as a picture—a picture he had seen somewhere and half-forgotten. He paid little attention as she approached him with the glass, but kept following out the thread of thought this idea suggested. God knows—or rather the devil knows, which is more appropriate—what evil spirit put it into his head. He looked at her fixedly as she came up to the bedside. He made no movement to take the glass when she held it out to him.

“Habit goes a long way,” he said, more to himself than her. “Put it down, Innocent; I don’t want my medicine from you; habit goes a long way—I wonder—will she ever do it again!”

He looked from her to the glass as he said this, and waved it away from him. I do not know by

what magic Innocent understood instantly and distinctly what he meant. He would never have permitted himself to say it had he not been confident in the slow and dim working of her mind, which generally lost all allusions and understood only plain speaking. But this time, for his punishment and for his fate, she saw in a moment what he meant. She gave a low cry. She looked at him with such a pathetic look as no human creature had ever turned on him before,—like that dumb mystery of reproach which sometimes comes to us from the eyes of a speechless creature, an injured animal, without words in which to form a complaint. Her hand shook, the little milk-white glass fell and crashed in a hundred fragments; and without saying a word Innocent turned away. With the sense of some spell upon him, which kept him speechless, Sir Alexis watched her go softly, quietly out of the room. He called her name before her dress had disappeared from the door, but she did not come back. What had he done? He lay there for some minutes, confounded, scarcely realizing what had happened, as wonder-stricken as though a marble figure had shown signs of feeling. Then he called loudly to the servant in the next room. “Ask Lady Longueville to come back, I want her—instantly!” he said. A

strange impatience flushed over him. "Nonsense, nonsense!" he said to himself, "what *can* happen? It is not possible that she understood me—and if she did? Pooh! Is it Innocent I am frightened for?" He laughed, all by himself, lying there in silence. How strange that laugh sounded! not as if it came from him, but from some mocking demon. He looked round, alarmed, to see who it was. "Innocent! Innocent!" he cried aloud, in a terror he could not account for. The servant did not come back. It seemed to him an age while he waited, listening, not hearing a sound in the house. "Innocent!" He sprang out of bed, feeble though he was, and clutched at his dressing-gown, and hurried to the door. There he met the servant coming back.

"Lady Longueville! Where is Lady Longueville?" he said.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Alexis, but my lady has just gone out. I might have caught her at the door had I gone there first, but I went up-stairs to call Mrs. Morton; she's not in her room, Sir Alexis; and John tells me as my lady is gone out."

"Gone out!" cried Sir Alexis in dismay. "Gone out—alone! Where has she gone? Go and ask which way she went. Go and ask if she said anything. Good God! can't you make haste! I mean

—Lady Longueville, of course, has gone to take the air. Why didn't you or John, or some one, go with her? a set of idiots! Why on earth is my wife to go out unattended with all of you there?"

"I was here, Sir Alexis," said the man in an injured tone, "and, besides, my lady——"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Longueville, in increasing agitation. "Let John go after her at once, as he saw what direction she took, and tell her to come to me directly. I have something to say—Go! go! go! don't lose a moment; and send for my sister," cried Sir Alexis, distracted. His head was throbbing, his limbs failing under him. He could send only his servants after his wife, he could not go himself to bring her back; he had to fling himself down on his bed exhausted, cursing himself and his fate. What had he done? What had he said? What horrible temptation had beguiled him? He said to himself that it could be but for a moment, that she must come back—that his sweet, simple Innocent would soon and surely forgive the evil words he never meant; but God help him! as he fell back on the weary bed from which he could not rise, what a miserable sinking, what a sense of some dreadful unknown calamity was in his heart!

Innocent went out of her husband's house, poor

child, she knew not how,—with that strange, helpless repetition of what she had done before, which seems to be natural to the undeveloped mind when stung with sudden pain. It was the only resource she had. What he had said to her was not an offence to her,—touse such simple words ; it was as if he had cut her down suddenly, without mercy or warning,—cut her to the very heart. It did not seem possible to her that she could live and go on after it ; it brought back to her all the misery of the past,—all her old conviction of guilt,—all the bewildered, wretched sensation with which she had fled from the house in Sterborne, in which Amanda lay dead. Had she tried to do the same again ? Her brain reeled when she attempted to ask herself that question ;—certainly that had not happened again what had happened then. The glass had fallen out of her hand and broken. Sir Alexis was living. He had not died. But what had put those terrible words into his mouth ? Had she tried to do it again ? She wandered forth in her horror and trouble, stricken to the heart,—ill in body,—torn by sufferings she did not understand,—and still more ill in soul, wondering was there not something that she, too, could take, and die ? When she fled from Sterborne, her way was clear to go home,—but

where could she go now? Not to The Elms, to bring more trouble upon them,—to some hole or cover, anywhere, where she could lie down—only lie down and die.

She wandered about through one narrow lane and another—she did not know nor care where she went;—and every moment it became more difficult to keep erect—not to fall down and perish altogether. She would have done so, and died probably in a dreary little suburban street, no one knowing who she was, had not old Alice come out of one of the humble houses where dwelt a sewing-woman to whom she had just taken work, as the forlorn creature wandered by. Alice, divining evil with the instinct which never fails a woman who knew so much of life as she had done, rushed to the girl's side, and clutched at her as, blind and sick with pain, she tottered by. "Miss Innocent! where are you going?—oh, what ails you, what ails you?" cried Alice.

"Take me somewhere," gasped poor Innocent, clasping her arms, with a sudden cry of anguish, round the old friend who came to her like an angel out of heaven,—“take me somewhere, or I shall die——”

The poor needlewoman stood wondering at her door; and into her poor little room Lady Longue-

ville was taken,—half conscious only of all that was happening to her. What a strange, sudden, miserable nightmare it seemed, after the quiet and peace of the morning!—pain of body, pain of heart, anguish which made her cry aloud, and a sick despair, which quenched and silenced every hope and wish in her. There was no time to ask questions, or to send for those who should have been by her in her suffering. Alice was the only support, the only help she had in heaven and earth. She clung to her, refusing to leave her hold.

“I want no one—no one but Alice,” she said, when they spoke to her of her husband and of her friends. And in this poor little house it was that the last hope of the Longuevilles perished and came to nothing—that which had given Innocent new importance in the family, and was to afford her a new beginning, as everybody hoped, both in the family and the world.

Meanwhile Sir Alexis’ servants went wandering far and near seeking for her. They went to The Elms first of all, and roused that peaceful house into anxiety and wonder.

“This time my lady has gone clean off her head altogether, as I always expected,” the messenger said to the servants of the house, who shook their

heads as he drank his beer, and agreed with him that they too had always expected it. I cannot describe the tumult, the vain searching, the runnings to and fro which ensued. It was late at night before any one remarked that Alice had not come home, a discovery which, mysterious as it was, gave a little comfort to the Eastwoods, at least. Nelly and her mother consulted together, and set out immediately on foot to the needlewoman's whom Alice had gone to visit, hoping to hear some news of her, some indications which they could follow out; and there they lighted quite simply, unawares upon Innocent, lying like one dead, speechless, colourless, the ghost of herself, with eyes which never brightened at sight of them, which seemed as if they could make any interchange of kindness ever more with other tender human eyes.

This new catastrophe fell upon them all like lightning from a cloudless sky—like the storm which bursts without warning or sign of evil. Sir Alexis, it is true, who lay at home in a state indescribable, took the blame entirely on himself, and accused himself of cruelty and barbarous folly, such as his attendants would have laughed to hear of, had they not been so much frightened by the condition into which remorse and excitement drove him,

calling back his half-departed malady with a hundred cruel aggravations. He moaned over his poor Innocent in all the paroxysms of his disorder in a way that was pitiful to hear.

“Bring her back to me, and I will be better to her than I have ever been. Bring her back and all shall be well; if I live—if I live!” he said, with a wail that was sometimes shrill with hope and sometimes bitter with despair.

This, however, was not to be. Innocent, paler than ever, blank and passive as she had been years ago, was brought back to him as soon as she could be removed, but only in time to see her husband in his last lucid moments, to receive his blessing, and to bid him farewell.

“You have been a good child to me, poor Innocent. God bless you!” said the dying man, putting his hand upon her head; and then he asked feebly and anxiously—“You forgive me for what I said?”

“I did not do it,” said Innocent, looking at him very earnestly. “I did not do it.” There was no anger in her eyes, only a firm, almost wild denial, which yet she was anxious that he should believe.

“I know you did not,” he cried. “Oh, Innocent,

my child, kiss me and forgive me ! you have been as good as an angel to me. It is I that have been unkind, only I——”

She stooped down over him, her face melting a little, and kissed him—then by a sudden impulse knelt down by his side. Innocent had but one thing that it came into her head to do when she knelt down upon her knees. She said “Our Father” reverently and slowly, like a child, by her husband’s bedside : “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that have trespassed against us.” I have heard that there was not a dry eye in the room : and when she rose up from her knees she kissed him again, and held his hand till he died.

CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

SOME time after this last calamity a large party was assembled, one bright October morning, in the drawing-room at The Elms. The house was full of flowers; it was full of commotion. Many carriages had cut up the orderly little gravel drive round the shrubbery in front: the door had been standing open all the morning, there were groups of people everywhere, even in the bedrooms, and the maids, in white ribbons, fluttered about the staircase, and bran-new trunks, with shining leather covers, stood in the hall. The dining-room door stood open, disclosing more flowers; a large, long table, covered with the remains of a feast; chairs thrust aside; and white napkins lying about as they had been left when the party adjourned into the drawing-room, where they had all gathered together

in bright-coloured groups, waiting till the bride should be ready. The bridegroom was already in the hall, looking at his watch, and hearing gibes about the putting on of bonnets, and the putting up of baggage, which was henceforward to be his accompaniment through life; his kind eyes shone as if they had been ten years younger—you could scarcely guess that he was getting bald about the temples, so glorified was the man with that wonderful glow of happiness which has a certain pathos in it when it comes a little later than usual. And yet it was not late; he was quite a young man still, even the bridesmaids said,—and his two young brothers-in-law, and his old sister, all clustering about him at this moment in the hall, were ready, at a moment's notice, all three of them, to have gone to the stake for John Vane. It speaks well for a man when he is thus supported on both sides. A great deal of talk was coming from the drawing-room, where the friends of the family, left to themselves, were discussing the matter, as people say our friends always discuss us when our backs are turned. There was nobody to keep this crowd in order. Mrs. Eastwood was up-stairs with the bride. The rest of the domestic party were in the hall, as I have said, consoling the bridegroom. Mrs. Everard, who rather

took it upon her to do the honours of the place when the head of the house was absent, was herself the ringleader in this talk.—Perhaps the gentle reader would like to know what they were saying, before Nelly, in her grey gown—Nelly sobered out of her white into walking costume—Nelly with her eyes rather red, and her lip trembling a little—comes down-stairs.

“I never believed in the other business for my part,” said Mrs. Everard, dropping her voice: “of course we must not so much as allude to it now,—but you remember as well as I do when Nelly was supposed to be going to do something very different. I never believed in it,—not even when we met him here continually, and the poor dear mother, who is too good for this world, let it all go on without taking the most ordinary preventives——”

“But, dear me!” said Mrs. Brotherton, the clergyman’s wife, “we heard that every arrangement was made, and that the judge and his family went into it quite as heartily as the Eastwoods did. Indeed, my husband met them here at dinner when the engagement was declared.”

“Oh yes, exactly; so did I,” said Mrs. Everard, “but there are wheels within wheels. I don’t mean to say I approve of that sort of thing, for I’ve

known it to spoil a girl's prospects, and cause a great deal of unhappiness; but, if you don't care about feelings, acquiescing in an engagement is a great deal better than opposing it, and often comes to exactly the same thing."

"I always understood," said Mrs. Brotherton indignantly, "that the Eastwoods broke it off in consequence of the way in which he behaved when poor Innocent was in trouble."

"Are you talking of young Molyneux?" said her husband, interrupting. "My dear, the less said about that the better. No man likes to remember that his wife was once to have been somebody else's wife——"

"Oh, you always take the man's view of everything," said the parson's wife; "but what I say is that it was Nelly who broke it off, and that she was quite justified, and I wish all girls had as much spirit and sense to stand up for proper treatment."

"Take my word for it, the Molyneux never meant it to come to anything," said Mrs. Everard, "they wouldn't oppose, of course, for the judge is wise, and knew that opposition is the very best way to fix a young man. But I saw through it from the beginning. I said to them over and over again, 'Why don't you settle about the marriage.'"

“And why didn’t they? because he had not the heart to go and work at his profession,” cried Mrs. Brotherton; “he was not well enough off to marry, and he never will be, unless the judge dies and leaves him rich, or unless he marries a woman with heaps of money. I am glad Nelly would have nothing to do with him,” cried the parson’s wife, who stood up for her own side. “What a comfort it is when a girl shows some spirit—there is so little in the world.”

“I doubt if Nelly’s spirit had so much to do with it as you think,” said Mrs. Everard mysteriously. “It was very silly of her mother not to tie him up, and settle the business. I always said so from the first. She played into the judge’s hand, and let him do as he liked. You may depend upon it *he* never meant it to come to anything from the very first.”

“Then he is a shabby wretch, and worse than I thought even a man could be,” cried the other, with vehemence.

“Oh, trust me, he always knew what he was doing; and the poor dear Eastwoods are sad simpletons,” cried Mrs. Everard, shaking her head with a pity which was not, perhaps, quite respectful. And, indeed, I think that this view of the question was generally adopted by society, which likes to

think that the woman has had the worst of it in all such cases. Some one advanced, however, at this moment to ask information about "poor Lady Longueville," in the most hushed and sympathetic tones, putting an end to the previous subject.

"One does not like on such a day as this to say anything which could bring a painful suggestion," said this considerate personage; "but I should like to know what has become of that poor girl."

"She is very well indeed," interposed Mrs. Brotherton. "She is with her cousin, Miss Vane, at that quaint establishment of hers. You never heard of it? It is not a sisterhood, and it is not a school——"

"I disapprove of all such mummery and nonsense," said another guest, rushing in. "Sisterhood! what do we want with sisterhoods? Popish rubbish—I'd send them all off to Rome; a pack of silly women——"

"Silly is the appropriate adjective to women, I believe," said Mrs. Brotherton, who was advanced in her views; "just as my husband puts 'grey-haired' to the noun 'father,' and 'kind' to the noun 'mother' in his sermons. Innocent, however, is very happy among these silly women—being silly herself, I suppose."

“Very happy? after all that has happened?” said the sympathetic questioner, holding up her hands with wonder and horror.

“Well! after a great misfortune, which was no fault of hers—and which, fortunately, ended in no harm; to be sure she has lost her husband, poor little thing——”

“That was a mistake—another mistake,” said Mrs. Everard, shaking her head. “Poor Innocent is as well as can be expected, Lady Dobson. She is very childish, and never will be anything else, I fear. She ought not to have been allowed to marry. As for poor dear Sir Alexis, she could not appreciate him when he was living, and she can’t be expected, I suppose, to feel his death very much. It was a mistake altogether. Of course, nobody could expect Mrs. Eastwood to do anything but jump at such a marriage for her niece. But it was injudicious—and, for my part, I always knew she was making a mistake.”

“What a sad story altogether! and to end in a convent—how romantic!”

“Convent, indeed! I did not know they went so far as to use that word in Protestant England! What are we coming to, good heavens!”

“But the Eastwoods were always an obstinate

race—no getting them to take advice—whenever they make up their minds to anything, wild horses would not move them. What, Nelly coming downstairs? Then let us see the last of her, ladies,” said Mrs. Everard, remembering that it was her place to do the honours as the most intimate friend of the house.

Nelly stood on the threshold in her grey gown; her mother held her by one hand, her husband by the other. She looked back upon a cloud of faces, all smiling, throwing good-byes and kind wishes at her—and, on the other side, the horses pranced and tossed their proud heads, the gates stood open, the sunshine streamed down through the brown trees, the world lay before her.

“Good-bye, everybody,” she said; “and to you, for a little while, mamma.” And that was the last of Nelly. There was never a Nelly yet, carried off by eager horses, by an eager bridegroom, among storms of white shoes and good wishes, who was more dearly taken care of thereafter than was the Nelly who signed herself from that day, in stately fashion, “Ellinor Vane.”

“You are all that are left to me now, boys,” said Mrs. Eastwood, as she sat between them that evening, over the first fire of the season, which had been

lighted for consolation. "Nelly will come back, but she will not be quite Nelly; one has to put up with it. You are all that are left to me now——"

"And Innocent."

"Yes, Innocent, poor child——"

"Look here, mother," said Jenny, somewhat hoarsely,—"none of us know yet what Innocent will come to. She's had hard work for a beginning,—none of us have had such hard work. As for Dick's and mine, though we're sorry enough for ourselves, what has it been to hers? But you'll see there's something to come of it. I suppose all that trouble is not likely to be for nothing, is it?" he said, almost indignantly, as if some one were opposing him; "if you mean what you say about Providence, do you think that can be all for nothing? I don't."

"God bless her, poor child," said the mother, with more faith than conviction. "You always believed in her, Jenny."

"And I do now more than ever," said the boy, with a flush on his cheek, going to the window, where he stood for five minutes, gazing out into the darkness, though there was nothing to see. He was twenty by this time, and his mind was one of those which work up to conclusions long made, with an obstinacy

which often brings about its own long determined aim. "It's a fine night," he added, coming back, as if the weather had been all his thought. "What a bore that there's no river to Sterborne. I tell you what, Dick, the next best thing is to drive,—we'll get a carriage to-morrow, and drive my mother there——"

"What, drive me all the way?" cried the mother, half alarmed, yet pleased that her boy should think of her pleasure.

"We could do it in two short days—like the people in the book you are reading," said Jenny; "why not?—We'll take you to the High Lodge to Innocent, instead of going by the railway,—and of course you will bring her back with you here,—Dick and I will look after the carriage to-morrow morning,—and we'll expect you to be ready by twelve, mamma."

"Bravo, old fellow!" said Dick, delighted; "and Winks, my old friend," he added, as Winks dropped from his chair and came forward, stretching himself, to inquire into the proposition which had startled him out of a nap, "you shall go too——"

"But, my dear boys——" Mrs. Eastwood began in a tone of remonstrance.

"The best thing in the world for you, mamma,"

said Dick, "and jolly for us, once in a way, to have you all to ourselves."

What could mortal woman, being the boys' mother, say more? I am afraid she would have considered favourably the idea of going to Nova Zembla, wherever that may be, under such conditions. And Winks, though he yawned as he listened, thought well of it too; he liked driving, on the whole, though too much of it bored him, and he had not at all approved when his mistress "put down" her carriage. They sat off next morning in the brightness of noon, through the country which had not yet lost any of its beauty, though here and there the trees had yellow patches on them, and the parks were all burnt brown with the heat of summer. They were a very merry party, notwithstanding that the final examination was hanging over Dick's head, and the parting which must follow. Winks, for his part, after two or three hours of it, got bored with the levity of the conversation, and rustled about so, that he was put out of the carriage to run, for the good of his health. He went along for a mile too, pleased enough, gathering dust in clouds about him. But when he intimated a desire to be taken in, the boys, hard-hearted beings, laughed in the face of Winks.

“A run will do you good, old fellow,” said Dick with cruel satisfaction. A short time afterwards, I am sorry to say, a dreadful accident, nature unknown, happened to Winks. He uttered a heart-rending shriek, and appeared immediately after making his way towards the carriage, holding up one feathery paw in demonstrative suffering. The anxious party stopped immediately, and Winks made his way to them, laboriously limping and uttering plaintive cries. But when, all a-dust as he was, this hypocrite was lifted into the carriage, holding up the injured member—and was softly laid upon the softest cushion to have it examined, words fail me to express the sardonic grin with which he showed his milk-white teeth. There was no more the matter with the little villain’s paw, my gentle reader, than with yours or mine.

Never was there a pleasanter two days’ journey than this which Mrs. Eastwood made with her boys through the sunshiny autumn country, along the road, where gold-coloured leaves dropped in her lap as they drove her along, now one on the box, now another, in their turn, till the High Lodge at last appeared in sight all covered with white downy clusters of clematis done flowering, with late roses,

and matted network of interlacing leaves Innocent rushed to the door, slim and pale in her black dress, her eyes shining with sudden delight, her soft face inspired.

“You have come to take me home. I am Nelly now!” she cried, throwing her arms about the common mother. Jenny, whom she had not noticed, leant back upon the carriage, looking at her with eyes that glowed under his dark brows. He had always stood by Innocent since the day when he had read Greek to her in the Lady’s Walk; he had always been sure that “something would come of her.” “We don’t know half what Innocent will come to!” he repeated now to himself.

THE END.

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